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a danganronpa v3 chapter five zine
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a danganronpa v3
chapter 5 zine

PREFACE

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Thank you for viewing all of our restored found footage. Restorations were completed over the course of a couple of months, but the project itself began 9 months ago. Everything you will view is unseen moments from Chapter 5 of Danganronpa V3. There's new twists on scenarios, there's canon divergence, there's angst, there's laughter, and there are amazing contributors.

Amazing contributors that need a giant round of applause! Thank you for your hard work and belief in the project. We appreciate all that you've done, and we feel you did Chapter 5 justice. Heart, soul, and pain can be seen in every piece.

Lastly, thank you, viewers! Enjoy **found footage: a chapter 5 zine** before Tsumugi erases what should remain unseen.

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Drv3final-draft.docx

written by warrior

Arrow, Exisal, poison, antidote, static. Bottle, bomb, static. There was nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothingnothingnothingnothing–! Shirogane furiously slammed her Monopad down on the floor amongst the mess of opened reports and frantically scribbled scripts.

This wasn't meant to happen. The script had gone all off the reins since chapter four, but she honestly thought she could work with it. Because hey, if she can't detach an irritable thorn from her side with tweezers, she can carve into her skin to remove it. So long as it's gone, that will do.

There was one plain truth to it all: Ouma Kokichi was the worst thing she's ever created.

Disdainfully, Shirogane glowered at the hangars' footage residing on her Monopad. The happenings behind the static were unknown to her, no matter how she studied the act, she could not decipher the subtext, the truth. And, for obvious reasons, she couldn't just waltz into the hangar. So, for now, she was stuck in her dorm until the others go to save their beloved 'hero'.

Fumbling about her notes, she found her original script.

Harukawa, fueled by determination, would go to save Momota and free him from Ouma's clutches. The Flashback Light… encouraged her to wipe that pest from existence.

Harukawa used poison, rather than making the job swift. But that shouldn't have been as problematic as it was. Poison shouldn't be an issue in a *killing game*.

But then there was Momota taking pity on his enemy and fronting the second arrow. *What a pain.* It was as though Shirogane was the one poisoned, slowly succumbing to her demise, feebly thinking she could fix this mess.

She banished those thoughts, and she hummed. In an ideal world, Momota would have gotten the antidote that Harukawa oh so *helpfully* brought. It'd be a joy if it was that simple.

Shirogane froze on a frame on the camera feed of Ouma tipping the life-saving liquid down his throat. *If only it were that simple*. If it was that simple, Ouma would have slowly yielded to his rightful death. Though if that occurred, Shirogane would admit it would've been plainly tragic to lose 'HaruMaki' to her execution, smugly named 'Thorn Princess'. *It would have been plain devastating to watch all that character development wash away.* So, Shirogane supposed she 'lucked out'.

She slowly dragged her pen across her now useless script. All those words were now neatly crossed out with a single red line. *Momota dies due to his illness in chapter six, and that inspires her little protagonist to find hope. Then she can finally reveal her true form. And spread despair tenfold so hope can prevail. I am the god of this new world.*

That was what she'd *like* to say. But playing God could only get one so far, unfortunately. The original script was useless. A waste of paper, and her *time*.

She sighed. Shirogane rolled back the footage on the Monopad, trying to find an inch of the truth. Curiously,

she followed Harukawa's path and paused the screen just before the hangar's footage cut. It was pure, raw emotion, the tears falling from Harukawa's eyes as she fled the murder scene... *Oh, it was beautiful.* Yet, while it was pleasurable to see her stone-cold assassin crumble, it still didn't help the matter at hand. Her first script was a failure because, according to her footage, Momota didn't get the antidote, Ouma did. Dully, she gazed at Harukawa's frustrated expression, she saw the glint of *guilt* in her eyes. *How interesting… Oh, I see.*

Harukawa thought *she* killed Momota.

Shirogane pursed her lips, she scrawled haphazard ideas down on her notebook. In Harukawa's narrative, she stormed into the hangar, fired up a frenzy and ended up missing, striking Momota. She then desperately ran to the Ultimate Detective's Lab to grab the cure to remedy her situation, only to find herself locked out, watching helplessly from the bathroom window after giving the antidote to Momota as Ouma steals the life from his hands. It all aligned with the footage.

That meant the five of them would find Momota's dead body slumped over at dawn. She frowned, "But why don't I believe that…"

Shoving her disbelief aside momentarily, she pondered. This meant she could still use her intended execution. Though it's unfortunate that Ouma was still alive, she could work with this. All she needed was a motive for Yumeno to kill him. It was… annoying that she was her only option to make the Blackened. Yumeno's character arc was plainly moving, and it'd be a shame to have her executed… but Saihara and Kiibo were too vital in her game to kill. And she can't kill (again), obviously. Unless of course, she could get Ouma to kill himself.

It was annoying, the antagonist was meant to be gone by chapter five. Her lip twitched. *Maybe no one died and I'm being played a fool.* That was impossible, she knew that, but in an ideal world, she'd get the chance to retrial. *Prepare for take two!*

Shirogane glanced back at her Monopad, she found it to be late. And while she was no amateur at pulling all-nighters, staying up was getting her nowhere. So she packed up her notes and carefully rearranged the books on her shelves to look normal, she reset her Monopad and decided to rest. She could plan a new trial script during investigation time. Nobody usurps the author.

…

After they opened the shutter, they burst into the hangar, Electrohammers in hand…

…to end this.

She'd end this mystery. She'd end this faux storyline–

But when the five of them stepped into the hangar, a sight more beholding than she could have ever anticipated awaited.

Oh… Oh. A splattered artwork of blood decorated the floor, patches on the supporting beams of the press, the substance crisping at the edges, leading down to the pool below, which remains wet in the middle. Using the hydraulic press for a murder… How unique. How beautifully agonizing for a death.

Shirogane repressed the urge to smile. While this was not what she expected to find upon entering the hangar, she revelled in

the fact that indeed, someone had died - and *oh*, they died terribly.

Yet the moment of euphoria quickly subsided as it hit her. *Who was under the press? And what happened after her cameras shut down?* There was no 'moment of realisation' cliche, she still had nothing.

Shirogane retained her 'dismayed' expression, she snuck a glance at the others, who were distraught, shock encompassing their entire bodies, unwavering. Her gaze listed off and eventually locked onto the yellow Exisal, which lay dormant in the middle of the hangar. The hatch was open, though, she already knew why. The red Exisal still sat in the corner of the hangar, which stayed the same.

Previously, Ouma had the Exisals watching Monokuma. They had circled the bear in the hangar, for whatever reason. Oh, how ingenious Ouma must have felt by that. How clever he thought he was, that he really thought his *toys* could even attempt to stage a wedge in Shirogane's mechanics. A giddy feeling had her wanting to quiver. *You really thought you did something with those Exisals, didn't you?* How futile. It was an annoyance, at best. *Though that's just your whole character, isn't it, Ouma?*

Hammers that could shatter her electrical security… How irritating. Despite Ouma's reputation as a self-proclaimed liar, Shirogane didn't doubt his claim that Iruma made the hammers. Perhaps she should have kept a better eye on the inventor, then maybe things wouldn't have turned out this way.

Shirogane then became acutely aware of Monokuma blabbering in the background and saw the bear passing out the Monokuma files. *How pointless*… She almost let disgust slip into

her expression as she looked down at the pad in her hands. *The victim was crushed by the hydraulic press and is unidentifiable… hah.* All the information on the file was utterly useless, she didn't know why Monokuma even bothered to make them.

The others argued back and forth, rambling about how Momota *must* be the victim. And while she did appreciate *someone* trying to find the truth, their evidence is lacklustre. They all seemed convinced Momota is dead because if the killing game was ongoing, it meant the mastermind was still alive. They're not wrong.

Or at least they're not wrong about one thing. They're incorrect to call Ouma the mastermind, that was plainly wrong. So, in actuality, Shirogane still had no proof as to who died, just blind accusations.

Whatever, her character was a whiny wimp, so she could contribute to this false narrative, "He ran away! We need to catch him immediately! He's obviously the culprit!" There, she said her part. And in truth, she really did hope someone went out searching for 'Ouma,' because whomever they found would help her find the truth regardless. If only it were that easy, but one can hope. *Heh.*

Saihara spoke up, "We… can't leave yet." His voice wavered, brittle and uncertain. He looked up at the others. "We don't know for certain if that dead body is Momota-kun. We haven't explored all of the possibilities yet."

And this is why Shirogane loved Saihara. He was everything Akamatsu wasn't.

Shirogane watched as the others argued. She occasionally

chimed in but watched Saihara tentatively. He didn't speak, even as Harukawa refuted him. He stared at the ground, he almost entirely ignored the objections of the other.

As Saihara looked down, Shirogane recounted the events leading to Momota's capture. She reminded Saihara that Momota was injured, which pressed the narrative that Ouma was the culprit. *Take the bait…*

Saihara once again denied any instance of certainty, remaining open to all versions of the truth. He resisted her urges to affirm Ouma as the culprit, meaning he too realised something wasn't as it seemed. *Perfect.*

And so, everyone wandered off. Saihara first headed over to the press. Shirogane stood stagnant near the yellow Exisal. The dim light of the hangar shone on her glasses, masking her expression.

Saihara stood in front of the blood splatter, standing completely still, frozen. If she could see his eyes, she would see the sadness that lingered in them. His head slumped down as he hesitantly stepped forward, to get closer to the press.

The blood, still fairly fresh, clung to his shoes as he stepped closer. His shoulders heaved as a heavy sigh escaped his throat - he squatted and his hand carefully inched towards the sleeve that hung limply outside the press's jaws. Yet, he hesitantly, tentatively brushed over the small arrow hole in the sleeve.
He flinched. A chilling melancholy fell over him, his posture slumped as his eyes examined the sheer amount of gore dripping from the press. But still, whatever resolve he had, it was enough to keep him going.

Saihara stood and turned around, walking over towards

Shirogane - he winced as he left footsteps behind in blood.
Saihara flashed her a sympathetic smile, "How are you feeling Shirogane-san?"

She avoided his eyes, looking down. "The Monokuma File this time… barely has any information in it at all," she murmured, characteristically quivering. If anything, it was a way to vent her frustration. Did the mascot conjure up the files just to rub it in her face, play her a fool?

Saihara looked away and thoughtfully placed his hand on his chin. "Yeah, it won't be much help to us."
Shirogane fought the urge to roll her eyes. "It's so useless, he probably shouldn't have even gone out of his way to give it to us…" she reaffirmed. *Useless, useless, useless.*

Unfortunately, that accursed bear came back and said his piece. Making a jab at Shirogane. She knew he was just telling her to hurry it up, but he could be less infuriating–! *Whatever, the audience is probably eating this up right now…* The bear blabbered on his usual 'nonsense' about ratings and such (usually she found glee in the subtle hints, but this time it was plain annoying). Monokuma glared at her after poking fun at her plainness, "It'd be false advertising if I didn't appear as often as I can, y'know?" And then he vanished into thin air, leaving without saying anything remotely useful. He basically just came to bully Shirogane. *How cute.*

As Monokuma disappeared she stuttered out, "A- Advertising? What advertising?" Saihara brushed it off, telling her to ignore the bear, to which she reluctantly agreed.

the bear, to which she reluctantly agreed.

Yet as Saihara went to walk away, she spoke up, "W- Wait,

Saihara-kun, you don't *actually* believe Momota-kun could h-have done this… right?" An expression of fear flashed over her face. *Play the part.*

He narrowed his eyes in response. "I… I'm unsure. I'd like to investigate more before I make any conclusions…"

She (internally) groaned. *Come on. Just tell me what you think, please.* Saihara decided the conversation was over, and his gaze wandered to the Exisal behind her instead.

It was annoying. This time, she'd *actually* have to investigate thoroughly. So, she carried herself over the press, making sure to make a show of trying not to stain her skirt (not that she cares about the blood all that much).

She found herself locked in a staring contest with the astronaut's sleeve. It's wrong.

There should be an arm in that sleeve based on how Momota wore it, adding on, the wound in the sleeve suggests there was an arm in there at one point regardless. No conclusive evidence was *anywhere!*

While to everyone else, it may seem obvious Momota died. But Shirogane knows Ouma - well enough to know he despises killing. It's what the motive video (she made) said. So, would someone like that really… Yet again, he threw a curveball at her by (in a technicality) getting both Iruma and Gokuhara killed.

Shirogane sneered at the press, she ran her finger among the two plates. Coldly, she stared at the blood running down her finger and into her palm. Grimly smiling (while nobody was watching), she blankly stared as the blood diverged in the

crevices of her palm. *I hope this is you, Ouma.* Despite that, she was starting to favour the story she kept pushing onto people.

The jacket in the press suggested something was set up. *Perhaps Ouma only wanted it to appear that he killed Momota. He drank the antidote, as shown in the footage, and then waited out the time for Momota to fly high.* It seemed ridiculous, but Ouma is ridiculous. Maybe he was fine murdering people if he didn't actually do the murdering, some bizarre trolley phenomenon that made him feel morally sound? Yet, as she stared at the sleeve, her own ideas sound ridiculous.

people if he didn't actually do the murdering, some bizarre trolley phenomenon that made him feel morally sound? Yet, as she stared at the sleeve, her own ideas sound ridiculous.

Why?

Some of the blood by the press was starting to dry. Harukawa used Strike-9, which kills slowly. Surely the blood would have been completely wet if Ouma had to wait out the poison, as that means Momota would have to have been crushed fairly recently.

Shirogane stood up and shuffled away, she learned one important detail. As to what that detail ultimately leads to, she didn't entirely know but…

K1-B0 came out of the bathroom (because he went there apparently) and walked over to Saihara. The two then walk into the bathroom together.

A few moments later, Shuichi came out of the bathroom holding a dripping-wet straightjacket (and that stupid scarf). The frown on his face matched the one on Shirogane's. *Why*

would Ouma…? Momota's jacket was under the press, but it wasn't right. Ouma's jacket in the toilet, the bloodstains of the arrows almost washed away…

She watched as Saihara gently laid down the clothes on the hangar's floor. Delicately, he touched the two small holes in the fabric, his fingers lingered over the faintest pink hue still clinging to the white fabric. From afar, she watched as his face twisted as he ran the calculations through his head.

What are you thinking? What do you know?

There was barely any conclusive evidence, but as Shirogane watched the cogs turn in Saihara's head, her own mechanics occurred in her own. Yet despite the large amount of evidence pointing to Harukawa as the culprit, something inside Shirogane, her own 'inner voice' just refused to believe it. It felt almost too easy. Common sense was futile. This was Danganronpa. All her previous script ideas consisted of Harukawa being the culprit, but 'no, that's wrong'.

Something happened in the hangar, and now either Momota or Ouma was dead. Dead under that press. A chilling smile rested on Shirohane's face. Regardless of who died, all evidence points to either of the two being the Blackened or the victim. This means no matter who's dead, someone will die by execution. Ultimate Astronaut, or Ultimate Supreme Leader? Both executions would be wonderful. Either way worked, as one dies a cold, lonely death by hydraulic press, and the other in a gruesome execution.

From the corner of her eye, Shirogane spied Saihara staring at the press from afar. The grief is barely hidden in his eyes as his analytic gaze searched over the blood. He didn't want this, he didn't want the power to find the truth. And yet here he was.

She knows Saihara will find the truth. It's in his character, she would know. *Let's find the truth 'together' Saihara, me and you. We will find the truth of this case.* A mastermind putting her faith in her protagonist, how low. How pathetic.

The trial bell rang and the five of them began to walk over to the Shrine of Judgement. Someone muttered about 'seeing one of the missing persons at the trial' (she knew that was unlikely).

You want to play games with me Ouma, Momota…? Game on.

If those two thought they could win, and usurp her own role, then they had another thing coming. Did they really think that this pitiful, desperate attempt can really ruin her game? It doesn't matter how you move your pawns, she owned the gameboard, and no character can rewrite their own pages.

You think you're smart Ouma? He could only be as cunning, as witty, as bratty as her pencil dictated. Did Momota really believe this so-called *plot twist* of teaming up with his foil would really be enough to throw her off the ropes? She was the god of this new world, and nobody can take that from her.

However this trial ends, the two puppets she wants gone will be dead. Chapter six was about her liberty, the final boss, the real final boss, and once this trial was finished, she could have that freedom. And oh, she had faith they will solve this case.

She had loose details strung together in her mind, fabricating a rough draft in her mind. The only fact she missed was the identity of the victim. It didn't matter, however, in full confidence she is assured that whoever thought they were smart hiding somewhere, will be brought to justice. It was a win-win situation,

really.

Nobody overthrows the mastermind.

The Monokuma statue loomed over them, it cast a tall shadow in the morning rays. The other students stood to the side, in the light, while she stayed under cover, in the dark.

Ouma and Momota would rue the day they embarked on this insignificant plan. No matter how they run, or how they plan, the characters of a story could never escape the narrative. Their stories have already been told, and she gets to write the perfect finale for them, crush aspirations for becoming something bigger than themselves. *You're not important enough to live on, you're just a stepping stone, a tool for me to create the finest piece of fiction known to the world.*

In the shadows, as the others argue, a long, thin smile carved itself onto her face.

Oh, you're more behind than you think. The day she was written off as a side character, was their first mistake. No matter how smart Ouma might think he is, he never was as ahead as he perceived he was.

And that must plainly eat you up inside, doesn't it? How will you feel upon realising how useless it all was? That I was hiding in plain sight all this time… You shrouded yourself in lies that you were blind to the plain old truth.

If only Ouma figured her out. If only someone could bring justice and find the wicked, cruel mastermind of these games! As the gates to the trial opened, Shirogane slipped into the small crowd as the elevator chugged down, hidden in plain sight.

00:24

00:25

LOSTfottage#154

Can we pretend that airplanes in the night skies are like shooting stars...

I could use a wish right now wish right now...

You still crying down there?... (* sigh *) and here I thought saihara-chan would like to have a chat with little ole me! Turns the pity party what shaaaame~

Cant believe you would lose your self to guy like me and call yourself the ultimate detective? *pfft* yeah right!

00:26

Ladies and gentlemen give it up for the boy detective the man of the hour Saihara shuichi! Watch him as you see his life getting destroyed right after another right before his eyes!!

I'm gonna kick your ass.

00:27

written by nimble

THE CONSTELLATIONS ON THE CEILING

Shuichi counted all the ways he could kill himself and got to twelve before he stopped keeping count.

After all, the possibilities were endless. Throw himself down the stairs. A kitchen knife to the throat. Tie bedsheets into a noose. He wondered if anyone would stop him, if non-action during an active suicide attempt would count any hapless observer as a killer. If he'd be doing everyone a favour by bringing them one headcount down.

So many people had died already that he was rounding down instead of rounding up, but no matter what, Shuichi had the sinking feeling that there would be more death before the end, if there were any survivors at all. If the world outside really had come to an end and they were truly the last bastions of humanity, then the human race was dead anyway. May as well make it a brilliant conclusion, right?

Shuichi was still contemplating his suicide when he left his room. He would walk around, get some fresh air, reminisce a bit, before settling on a method. Then, he would end it. He wondered, for not the first time, if Kiibo's rendezvous with the hydraulic press had been a thinly veiled suicide attempt he'd backed out of at the last minute.

Maybe his death wouldn't be the only one tonight.
Shuichi earnestly wondered when or if he'd see Kaito again. He'd become one of his closest friends, and he certainly

couldn't remember having many of those in his life. He craved his familiarity, and assured strength.

Maybe Kaito was separated from them right now, but his room was right there.

Shuichi wondered if it was creepy to go sniffing around Kaito's room when he was being held hostage, but evidently someone else had the same idea when he summoned the courage to leave his own den and found Kaito's door slightly ajar. It was quiet in the building. Everything had become so still since so many people had died, one after the other. He wondered if a ghost had left Kaito's door open.

It wasn't the case, though, not when he looked inside and saw Maki lying on his bed, staring at the underside of the ceiling. Shuichi had learnt the telltale signs of Maki silently torturing herself, and she was doing it now. The sadness radiating from her was so pronounced that he almost missed what she was staring at.

Shuichi tried to think when Kaito could've gotten the time to paint his own ceiling and how he would've done it. Maybe Angie had given him a hand; it certainly had her chaotic hallmark to it. The underside of the ceiling was painted in a cacophony of brilliant colours against a deep blue backdrop, speckled with glow-in-the-dark paint. Maki had the lights off, so the effect was in full swing. It was like staring out into eternity. He stood there, wondering if he was unwelcome, but he could tell Maki had noticed him and she wasn't yelling at him to leave. He hesitated, then went over and lay on the bed beside her so they could both look up and pretend they were stargazing. It felt strange without Kaito there to serve as a buffer between them and no one doing push-ups.

"I came in here to die," she said.

Shuichi exhaled all the tension through his nose.

"But looking at this reminded me that I have some unfinished business to attend to first. Even when he's not here, Kaito has a way of being…intrusive."

Shuichi was struck by the thought that although he wanted to end it all, he didn't want anyone to follow through with their own plans. "You know, I'm sure there are people outside of here who would want you to keep moving forwards."

"Like who?"

"There must be someone."

"There were and now they're dead, according to Kokichi. There's no point making stupid promises for the dead. They're not around to care."

"I'd care."

"I don't think any of us are going to live long enough for it to matter."

"It's not over yet."

"Kokichi sure makes it sound like it is."

"He doesn't make the rules."

"He's the Mastermind. He makes the rules, or did you tune out that part of the conversation?"

"I'm just saying, if something ever happened to you, I would care."

Maki snorted and rolled her eyes. "Your mistake."

The silence was endless and painful. He wanted to reach for Maki's hand and squeeze it, but she had them intertwined over her abdomen, fingers glued together so tight that there was no hope of prying them apart. Even if he did, he felt confident that she would slap him for the trouble.

He left her staring at the ceiling. Nervous energy was thrumming through him, torching him alive. He wanted to end it all. He wanted to live and find the answers. Two contradictory goals that were fundamentally incapable with each other.

Shuichi gathered a plate of food from the kitchen. It felt strange to roam around without Monokuma popping up to harass him, but he wasn't complaining. He didn't know if trying to bring Kaito some food or not counted as a suicide attempt when Kokichi had the Exisals under his control, and when he made his way to the hanger, he expected to be gunned down in his path. At least this way, his death couldn't be manipulated to be anything other than robots shooting him dead, and he'd be spared the trouble of trying to come up with a way to end his life.

He was two steps into the corridor when an Exisal appeared in his path, guns blaring and at the ready. Shuichi looked steadily up at it and didn't know what to feel aside from a faint flicker of what could've been fear and regret.

To his surprise, though, the Exisal didn't shoot him dead. There was a long moment where they looked at each other, then the Exisal stepped aside and gestured him forwards with a jerk

of its gun.

Shuichi hadn't expected to get that far, but he moved forward anyway. The fear was gone now that he knew that he wasn't going to die tonight, though he wished he would when he reached the small window looking into the bathroom.
Kokichi was waiting for him. Of course he was. He grinned like he had the time Gonta had knocked Shuichi unconscious and he'd woken up with Kokichi all but sitting on top of him.

"Did you bring food?" Kokichi asked. "How did you know I was hungry?"

"It's not for you," said Shuichi. "It's for Kaito."

"Is this the kind of treatment I get when I'm taking such good care of him?"

"Holding him hostage is not taking good care of him."

"I am the best pet owner." Kokichi snatched the plate and looked over his shoulder. "Look, I'm even going to let him eat my table scraps."

"Fuck you, too," said Kaito.

Kokichi turned towards Shuichi, opened his mouth, and Shuichi had a glimpse of Kaito's hands reaching for him. The sly grin and realization on Kokichi's face was fleeting but strong. He ducked out of the way.

"Think faster!" said Kokichi. He wagged a remote from a safe distance. "Kaito, I'm disappointed in you."

"Because I really was gunning to get your approval," Kaito

drawled.

"Hey, hey, hey, no need for the attitude. Look, I'll even make you a deal. You promise to behave, and we share the food."

"I'm not hungry."

"Just tell him you'll behave," said Shuichi.

"Whose side are you on?!"

"I'm just saying, Kokichi hasn't said that it's a promise you have to keep."

They both looked at Kokichi. His expression was unfathomable, and Shuichi couldn't decide if it was pride or smugness or maybe a twinge of resigned sadness or maybe all of the above, a kaleidoscope of expressions swirling together like a painting being washed away by rainfall. Kokichi sensed that Shuichi was watching and settled back on a smug, shit-eating grin.

"He's got a point," Kokichi shrugged.

"A real man doesn't make promises he doesn't intend to keep," said Kaito.

"Are you really going to hold onto a self-imposed, gender-based code of conduct at a time like this?"

"Kaito, make the promise," said Shuichi.

"I'm trying to—y'know what? Fine. I promise." Kaito held out his crossed fingers. "See? I'm even crossing my fingers, showing I have no intention of holding onto this promise."

"Hm, that felt good," said Kokichi. "Can you promise again?"

"Don't push your luck."

Kokichi laughed.

That was how Kokichi and Kaito ended up sitting cross-legged on the floor, with Kokichi holding tight onto the remote with one hand, and the other picking at the food. For all his bluster about being hungry, he seemed very selective about what he was eating, while Kaito scarfed things down without discrimination. It was almost like the meals they'd all shared as classmates before people had started dying, when he'd thought of Kaito as a blustering hero ready to save them all and Kokichi was the funny little weirdo no more harmful than a white lie and all of them had been alive.

And Shuichi wondered how many more were going to die before it all ended. He felt the conclusion to their story rushing towards them like a broken dam and he didn't have a concrete truck to stop the flow.

"You could end the game for good," Shuichi finally said. He wasn't sure what possessed him to confront Kokichi so directly when they were in his space. Kaito looked horrified. After looking surprised for a second, Kokichi grinned.

"What if I want to keep playing?" Kokichi asked. "There's no winner yet."

"You already won."

"I think we still have some unresolved quest lines to wrap up before we can declare a winner, if there are any."

Well, it was worth a shot. It'd been a long one to begin with.

"You hear that, Shuichi?" said Kaito. "Means we still have a chance."

"I mean, do you guys really have one if they have you on your side?"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Astronauts are supposed to be some of the smartest people on the planet. You look like you keep a ruler under your pillow to see how long you sleep each night."

"That's—you—I do not!"

"Didn't you try that once?" Shuichi asked dryly.

"S—Shut up! You know I didn't! You don't need to be smart to go to space! You just have to be determined!"

Kokichi laughed like Kaito had just delivered the punchline to a worthwhile joke, then snatched an apple off the plate.

"Hey, Shuichi, think fast!" said Kokichi.

Shuichi managed to grab the apple before it clobbered him in the face.

"Nice catch," said Kokichi. "Speaking of smarts, you should eat up and keep those brain cells working. You look like you haven't eaten in days. You're gonna need them if you want even a chance at winning against me."

"If you're so determined to win, wouldn't it benefit you if I was

compromised in some way?" Shuichi asked.

"Don't be silly. Maybe it'd be an easy win, but it sure wouldn't be an interesting win." Kokichi stared down at the food, and for a moment, Shuichi thought he looked wistful. "Maybe that's all they want."

He locked eyes with Shuichi, but the smile seemed flat until Shuichi took a bite of the apple. It was the first taste of food he'd had in two days. Energy swarmed into his body. Only then did Kokichi break eye contact and go back to teasing Kaito, who was fuming in between bites of his food.
Maybe there was going to be death coming their way soon, but Shuichi realized that it wasn't going to happen tonight.

Kaito, who was fuming in between bites of his food.

Maybe there was going to be death coming their way soon, but Shuichi realized that it wasn't going to happen tonight.

00:36

00:38

00:39

LITTLE ROBOT

written by bright*star

Little robot, a project you were part of
To help protect the ones you love
To save the world and rebuild
But why were you chosen when you're so weak willed?

With the strength of an old man and not that wise
No one would care about your cries

Little robot, cannot repopulate
Perhaps you were only meant as bait
To help the Exisals in their task
But no one would even care to ask

Little robot hurt his maker
Nearly killed him like a sharp razor
Professor Idabashi may be your dad
But if he saw you now would he be sad?

A tweak to your strength should be made
That way if danger comes you can evade
A new planet was the goal
But now you're down the rabbit hole

Little robot, the mastermind may tinker
You are all wrapped around his finger
A robophobe he is indeed
He will laugh as you concede

Little robot, your voice says not to worry
For you should be in a hurry
There's tasks to be done, too little time on your hands
Tomorrow you take your stands
A gift from Miu to help your cause
Even now she gives you applause

Talk to Kokichi before you go
For he may not always say no

Little Robot, full of hope
To save a friend from the final rope
You soldier on and fight despair
But always know, you must beware

REC

00:42

Rec

00:43

written by myaami

collaboration art by hellscap3

REMEMBRANCE

Shuichi wanders through the courtyard alone, losing himself among the grassy field. He walks until he's as far away from the most recent verdict as possible then when he can't go any further, he sits and stares up at the night sky.

It's not fair.

It's not fair that the stars can shine so brilliantly when everything Shuichi believed in was upended in that cruel and chaotic trial. He had no choice but to expose the devastating truth in the same way he did Kaede's crime. He hadn't thought he could break any more after that; Kaito and Kokichi proved him wrong.

A silent figure casts a dark shadow over him. Shuichi lifts his eyes, wondering how, or why, anyone would seek to find him here. The figure steps closer and takes a seat beside him. Shuichi cycles through all the things he could say to Maki—

'Why did this have to happen?'

'What could we have done to stop it?'

'I miss him too.'

'I'm sorry.'

—but none of them are right. Maki tugs at her hair, seeming to

be struggling as well. Shuichi returns his gaze up above, breathing in the stillness around them.

He remembers the last time the three of them trained together. It was a beautiful night, just like this one. And while Shuichi and Maki were actually *doing* the sit-ups, Kaito laid on his back, arms stretched behind his head, admiring the stars and telling the two of them to work hard.

Shuichi chuckles in remembrance, then stills, startled that he could ever make that sound again.

Maki turns to him with a harsh and pained expression, but Shuichi points up to a star burning bright at the top of the dome. It's a new star, maybe. Or at least, one that hasn't glowed this brightly in the past.

"It's Kaito's star," Shuichi decides. "He's still with us. His memory and his perseverance are still alive in us."

Maki follows his gaze and takes in the star, a deep blue blinking down upon them. She considers it for a long moment.

"You're right," she eventually says with a small smile. "He's too stubborn to leave us."

It's still not fair, Shuichi thinks. And it's still not okay. His heart is aching, but he knows with certainty that Kaito never gave up, not even until the very end. That gives Shuichi hope.

But hope requires a complement: the strength to go on when things are tough. And what gives Shuichi strength is recognizing the love that he and Maki and everyone else had for Kaito. Shuichi knows without a shadow of a doubt that he can lean on his friends when he himself feels lost.

The light from the star above glows warmer, and with Shuichi's hope and strength, he truly believes he can honor Kaito's last request and the unspoken request of everyone who had died: to end the killing game.

written by saimatsushipper
collaboration art by threeten

RELAPSE

The whole truth was revealed. The conclusion.

This is the end.

There is no ‘outside world’. We’re the only humans left alive.

Trying to get outside was pointless. And we played the killing game for it.

It was all meaningless.

...That’s the conclusion. This is the end of everything. Our story ends here.

There will be no more death, no more killing game. It’s all pointless.

...The truth is...we all should have just died a long time ago.

—

...

I don’t even remember how I got back to my room.

I just remember how much it hurts.

I grasped my head as I slammed my back into the door and

locked it.

I couldn't speak to anyone else after what had happened.

But those eyes... They felt familiar.

Almost like...

"You did this, you brat!"

I gasped as I closed my eyes, not wanting to think about it. But the memories came back. Even now, that gaze still haunts my mind.

It's all my fault.

My fault.

My...fault...

Myfaultmyfaultmyfaultmyfaultmy-

NO.

That's not who I am anymore! Not after what I promised Kaede!

But I can still see it.

Those eyes... Even when I close mine, I can still see them.

They're everywhere. I can't escape them.

Myfaultmyfaultmyfaultmyfaultmyfaultmyfault.

...

I can't breathe.

My head feels dizzy.

It's just like back then, before my uncle gave me my hat.

Where is it?

I haven't seen it since I took it off. I better go find it.

But I could barely move.

Why won't my body listen? I need my hat back!

"Also, I think you would look way cooler if you didn't wear that hat."

"Once we're out of here, I want you to show me what you look like without the hat, okay?"

No... Not now...

Dammit! Why did I have to think about her?!

...

I can't see her again.

I killed her.

Just like before, it's my fault.

My fault.

My fault.

Myfaultmyfaultmyfaultmy-

STOP IT.

She's not here anymore.

There's no reason...to keep that promise...

I have to find my hat. I need it.

My whole body fell when I tried to walk.

It's because of those eyes.

I can feel them staring at me.

Staring.

Judging.

Staring.

Judging.

Staringjudgingstaringjudgingstaringjudgingstaringjudging-

"SHIT!"

...

My hand hurts.

Why did it hurt?

00:52

It feels so sore.

I'm sore.

I tried to find my hat, but before I knew it, I felt my body in the bed, numb.

...

I didn't want to sleep.

I just wanted to run away from the despair. But the sleep came anyway.

00:53

drawn and **written by doctorhaifisch**

THE DEAD OF NIGHT

It's not real. This isn't real. *This can't be real – !*

It was as if the tiny, square window had narrowed down to a viewfinder, through which a projector reel rolled a film entirely detached from reality. Distorted by static grain and cathode rays, Maki watched Kaito exhale a mist of blood. Then, she blinked, and the man on his knees was crumpling from a gun-shot wound.

Maki lowered her gun, trying to remember why she'd killed him – trying to remember what was written in the case file that was tossed haphazardly into the tiny, unfurnished cell they called her room. This man was running a human trafficking ring, wasn't he? Or was that just a story Maki made up to make it easier to shred a lead bullet through his lung? The only thing Maki could remember was the way the man had coughed – the way he'd spluttered and gagged and died because of her – because she –

– shot Kaito.

She shot Kaito!

She shot –

"Kaito – !" Maki was shocked back into reality when Kokichi – that heartless, foul, wretch of a *thing* – pressed the mouth of the antidote bottle to his lips and tossed it back like a shot. On

his hands and knees, Kaito gawked, his mouth hanging open in stunned silence.

Maki hadn't realized she was screaming until a lightning bolt of pain cleaved through her elbow, and her knife came down on the hangar's control panel once again. She had no idea how she'd gotten there or how long she'd been slicing the blade across the display over and over and over and –

Chest heaving, Maki staggered backwards. Her knife clanged off the control panel one last time, leaving yet another hideous stripe through the metal. Despite the destruction, the hangar's shutter remained closed, cutting Maki off from Kokichi, from Kaito –

With a helpless sob, the assassin spun on her heel and raced back towards the bathroom, her thoughts wailing in denial. As her fingers curled over the window ledge, however, her mind went numb with disbelief because the bathroom was –

It was empty.

Maki hadn't thought her heart could possibly beat any faster, but in that moment, it broke into a full gallop. Maki's eyes swiveled back and forth, taking in the sight of the crossbow bolts littering the tiles, their tips still shining with blood and gore.

"K-Kaito…?" Maki's voice quivered like the arrow she'd shot into Kaito's arm – like the shuddering breaths that had sputtered from his throat – like –

There was no response. Maki called out for Kaito again, shivers racing up and down her spine. This had to be a trick, right…?

"...Kokichi?" Maki hated how small her voice sounded –

scared and weak and feeble. Yet, even this plea was met with silence. There was no wheeze of pain, no weakened snicker, no triumphant cackle. The bathroom was utterly silent.

Like a tomb…

Maki couldn't remember leaving. She couldn't remember running away, or how she wound up standing in front of her own door, swaying dizzily. Her socks were torn and bloodied, indicating that she'd fallen outside at some point. Her knees stung, but Maki wasn't sure if it was from pain, or from the static still sizzling inside her head. Maki felt like a fruit cored by hungry worms – hollow and empty and numb. Nothing felt real anymore; nothing felt *right*. Nothing felt –

There was a soft whinny of breath against the nape of Maki's neck. Like something straight out of a horror movie, there was a childish giggle, followed by the pattering of shoes scampering away.

The knife was back in Maki's hand in an instant, and when she whirled around, she saw a familiar shadow stretching across the floor towards her. With a warning shout, Maki slashed the air, yet the shadow wisped away as if the blade had somehow made contact. Mortified and confused, Maki gasped, stumbling back until her shoulder blades hit the door to her room.

Maki felt a primal fear overtake her – a terror she hadn't known since she was a little girl locked in a tiny cell awaiting her next punishment. Without caring who she might accidentally awaken, Maki threw open her door and slammed it shut, pressing both hands against it like a child trying to seal away the monsters in the night.

"This isn't real…" Maki whispered. "This isn't – " Panting, she

sagged against the doorframe. The silence in her room was deafening – like a crypt – like a grave – like a –

Maki froze, eyes wide as a dark shape twitched in her peripheral vision. The assassin turned slowly, heart pounding, then gasped and dropped her knife in shock. The blade clattered to the floor as Maki stumbled towards the limp body of Kaito Momota. He was lying in a heap on the carpet, his blood soaking into the fabric deep enough to stain it black.

How is this possible…?! Maki's mind was racing. *Did Kaito escape the hangar?! How did he get here so quickly?!*

"K-Kaito…?! H-Hey!" Maki raced toward his side, praying he was still alive. Trying not to panic, she seized his shoulder and gave it a rough shake. His head lolled lifelessly like a scarecrow stuffed with straw, and Maki let out a strangled whine. Even through his coat, she could feel the chill that had settled into Kaito's skin, and when the palm of her other hand pressed into the carpet, bile crept up her throat when she realized the bloodstain was also cold.

"No…" With both hands, Maki shook Kaito's shoulder as if that could somehow jar him back to life. "You can't be dead…! This has to be some fucked up dream…!" Maki had always been pragmatic – never one to give in to childish thoughts and fantasies, but – "This is s-some kind of nightmare, right?! This can't be happening!"

Maki realized she was crying when a tear rolled down her cheek and shattered against Kaito's pale lips. His body was already stiff – his skin devoid of warmth and color because –

He's dead. Maki's brain short-circuited in shock. Kaito's dead because –

"You killed him." A familiar voice pressed against Maki's ear, and she felt a flash of hate and rage burn through her body like a wildfire.

With an uncharacteristic shriek of fury, Maki flew to her feet, only to stagger back, bewildered, when she realized there was no one behind her. When Maki swiveled back around, even Kaito's body was gone, yet the bloodstain remained. The puddle was fresh and glistening, and slowly expanding as blood dripped from somewhere above.

Trembling from head to toe, Maki lifted her eyes, then clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle a startled gasp when she saw the bones dumped in a small heap on her bed. They were tiny bones, like the bones of a child – like the children at the orphanage – like a frightened trainee she'd been forced to kill – like –

Ryoma…?!

Shivering, Maki approached the bed, her mind stuttering and rewinding over and over as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. The bones were jutting ghoulishly from chewed flesh and half-eaten fabric while several dozen piranhas flopped wetly atop the sheets. When Maki's knees bumped against the mattress, one of the fish tumbled over the side and began wriggling like a maggot on the floor.

"H-How is this – even *possible*…?" Maki's throat was so dry, she could barely speak. "Why – "

"Because you killed him." Kokichi's voice slithered around Maki's throat, and her entire body seized up, stiff and inflexible like Kaito's corpse. "You gave Ryoma his Motive Video. You gave him all the proof he needed to know he had nothing left

to live for. Ryoma gave up on life because of you. He let Kirumi kill him."

"I didn't know…!" Maki protested weakly. "I didn't watch Ryoma's video! *I didn't know!*"

"Aaw, how irresponsible!" Kokichi cooed. "Willingly handing over a *motive* in a *killing game!* Sure, Mom killed Ryoma, but *you're* the one who opened his casket, Maki Roll – "

"Don't call me that!" the assassin screamed, whipping back around. "You – "

Whatever Maki meant to say died in her throat when she saw a young man stumbling backwards, keening in pain. He was clutching his gut, blood oozing between his fingers. Suddenly, Maki was standing in a dark alley, her long hair heavy with rain. She glanced down, eyes widening when she realized she was still clutching a bloody knife.

"Don't you see?" Kokichi snickered from the shadows. "You're Death walking, Maki Roll. Kaito was doomed to die the moment her met you!"

"No! That's not true!" The knife tumbled from Maki's bloodied palm.

"Hey, don't cry, Maki Roll! Chin up!"

The assassin clenched her eyes shut, squeezing a swell of tears down her cheeks. Shivering from the rain, from the cold, from *fear,* Maki turned towards the voice, and when she finally opened her eyes, she let out a weak whimper.

Kaito sat slumped in the corner of her room, pale and

sweating. Yet, despite the pain in his eyes and the arrow jutting from his arm, he smiled at Maki as if he'd never been happier to see her.

"Don't blame yourself for what happened." Blood bubbled from Kaito's lips with every word. "It's not your fault, Maki Roll, so don't listen to Kokichi. He's just being a shit."

"Y-You're still alive…?" Overwhelmed with relief, Maki collapsed to her gravel-burnt knees and began crawling towards Kaito. "Are you…?" Maki swallowed as she tentatively reached toward him. "Are you *real*…?"

Chuckling fondly, Kaito grasped Maki's hand and gently pressed her palm against his cheek. He felt… *warm*. Overly so.

The poison, Maki realized, her eyes stinging with a fresh wave of tears. *He's dying, and it's all my –*

"It's not your fault," Kaito repeated. "You didn't kill me, Maki Roll. *Kokichi* killed me."

"But if I… if I hadn't shot you…" Maki bit her lip to suppress another whimper.

"Kokichi's the freakin' mastermind," Kaito reminded her. "And *he's* a Remnant of Despair. *He's* the one who put us all through this hell, and he's the one who's been laughing at our misery. You did the right thing by breaking into the hangar to kill him."

"…What?" Maki felt her breath stagger. The warm smile on Kaito's face suddenly looked wrong – as if someone had hooked the corners of his mouth and wrenched them far too tightly. Even the feverish light in his eyes glowed in a way that seemed gleeful, rather than poisoned. Maki exhaled sharply, and a

shudder ran through her curled body. "Kaito, you jumped in front of the arrow to *save* Kokichi…"

"That little fucker did this to us." It was as if Kaito hadn't heard a single word Maki said. "He's always been a menace, but something like this – " Kaito's eerie grin began to look more like a snarl. "I'm counting on you to find him, Maki Roll. Find Kokichi and *finish what you started*."

Maki's heart felt heavy – like a stone tumbling down into her gut. "You're not Kaito…" The assassin wrenched her hand away from his face.

"Huh? Whaddya mean, Maki Roll?" Sneering, Kaito cocked his head to the side.

"The real Kaito isn't – He wouldn't – " Maki shook her head, trying to keep the tears at bay. "The real Kaito wanted to *stop* me from killing Kokichi. He wanted *everyone* to stop. You're just a figment of my imagination telling me what I want to hear…"

"I dunno," Kokichi muttered from somewhere behind her. "Isn't that *exactly* what the real Kaito would do? He *was* a liar, after all."

"Shut up!" Maki surged to her feet and flung her arm out to slap him. Her hand slashed through empty air, however, and the scream of rage withered in her throat when she saw Kokichi slumped in the opposite corner of the room from Kaito.

There was blood trickling from Kokichi's lip as if he'd bitten through it, and there were dark circles under his eyes as if someone had violently pressed their thumbs into the sockets. Kokichi was bleeding through his stark-white uniform, and now that Maki looked closer, she could see the impact splatter on

the wall where Kokichi had collapsed against it and slid to the floor. The Supreme Leader's pitiful appearance only made Maki's fury flare brighter.

"How dare you!" she spat. "You're a Remnant of Despair, you heartless asshole! And I should've killed you the *second* I had the chance!" Maki expected Kokichi to tease her or crack a tasteless joke, but he just blinked slowly, as if all the fight had gone out of him. "Well?!" Maki barked. "What do you have to say for yourself, you piece of shit?!"

Even if Kokichi wanted to defend himself, it didn't look like he had the energy or will left to argue. His silence further infuriated Maki, and her fingers curled into her hair, threatening to tear clumps from her scalp. With an enraged sob, Maki crumpled to the floor.

"I don't get it," Kokichi said softly. "Why don't you just end it already…? I'm here, aren't I? So, why don't you just kill me now and avenge Kaito? You've already strangled me twice, so what's stopping you from finishing what you started? I'm the mastermind, so killing me will finally end this boring game."

Maki gawked at Kokichi in disbelief. "Do you think I don't *know* that? Do you wanna die?!"

The Supreme Leader had the audacity to snort, though there was no real amusement behind it. "I mean, I could be lying, but if you kill me, and the game ends, that means there won't be any more rules. You wouldn't even become the Blackened. Committing murder without any rules is no different from the life you've been leading up till now, right?"

Maki's chest went cold. *No, that's not –*

"Admit it." Kokichi's sneer stretched crookedly across his wet, bloodied teeth. "The threat of becoming the Blackened was the only thing stopping you from acting on your killer instincts."

"...That's not true."

"Oh?" Kokichi narrowed his dull, violet eyes. "So, you stopped strangling me out of the goodness of your heart? Don't lie, Maki Roll. I hate liars!"

"...I stopped choking you because I knew you were *scared*," Maki spat. "I've always killed from a distance, or killed quickly, because I never wanted to see the *fear* in my victim's eyes." The confession tightened around Maki's throat as if *she* was the one being strangled. "I – I'm not *heartless*, Kokichi! You hid it well, but I – I could see the terror in your eyes when I grabbed you, and I could feel your pulse racing. I don't *enjoy* feeling things like that! Knowing that I've become this – this *killing machine*! It *horrifies* me!"

Kokichi blinked slowly, his lips pursed. "Uh huh…" It didn't look like he believed a word Maki said, and somehow, that hurt far worse than his accusations.

"When I grabbed you by the throat," Maki continued. "I felt like an assassin neutralizing a threat. But when I felt how fast your heart was beating, I felt like a *monster* killing a *child*."

Kokichi sneered, and the shadows on his face warped and swiveled as if the lights in the room were swinging from pendulums. "I'm the *mastermind*, you idiot. *I'm* the monster who's been killing children!" Kokichi sat up slowly, grinning with far too many teeth. "This is *my* game, Little Miss Assassin, and I'm not gonna stop until someone destroys me! I wanna enjoy this game filled with suspicion and betrayal from the bottom of my

heart!" Kokichi threw his head back and cackled.

Hearing the horrible taunts that tumbled from the Supreme Leader's lips, Maki swore she could still hear the crackling of Gonta's corpse strung up in the pyre. "Shut up!" Maki felt a rush of anger jolt through her. "You – you're *sick*!"

"Well, I *am* the supreme leader of evil, so it's obvious my personality would be twisted!" All the color drained from Kokichi's flesh as if his heart was pumping darkness through his veins. "The more you suffer, the more I enjoy it! There are people in this world who spread grief and misery for no reason than the thrill of it! Nothing pleases me more than inflicting pain on others! I loved watching Kaito shrivel away in the hangar bathroom! I thought it was *hilarious*!"

As if the words had plunged a knife into his chest, the Kaito bleeding out in the other corner of the room slumped over. The second his body hit the floor, the world tilted, and Maki and Kokichi were once again standing in the hangar. Despite the arrows jutting from his back and arm, Kokichi leered down his nose at Kaito, giggling as the astronaut convulsed from the Strike-9 poison scorching through his blood.

"This is my gift to you, Maki Roll." Kokichi gestured reverently towards Kaito's writhing form. "You ran away before you got to witness the consequences of your actions, so you're gonna stand here and watch Kaito take his last breath. I'm gifting you the despair of witnessing the moment you become Kaito Momota's *murderer*."

"N-no…" Maki watched helplessly as Kaito wheezed. "*You're* the one who drank the antidote – !"

"Nee-heehee! And isn't that soooo funny!" Kokichi shook his

head and laughed. "I'm the killer, yet *you're* the Blackened! Oh, this trial's gonna be so much fun!"

Before Maki even realized what she was doing, she was back in her room with her hands wrapped around Kokichi's throat. Distantly, she registered how *tiny* he was – like a doll with all its cotton squeezed out through its stitches.

Maki's thumb pressed deep into Kokichi's carotid artery, and this time, her heart twisted with *pleasure* when she felt how fast *his* heart was beating. The large, violet eyes staring back at her were wide with terror, and that only made Maki clamp Kokichi's throat tighter.

And yet, somehow, despite the fingers crippling his windpipe, Kokichi still managed to speak. "K-Kaito – "

"Don't say his name!" Maki roared. "Just die already – !"

"K-Kaito w-wouldn't… want this…" Kokichi wheezed.

"Well, guess what?" Snarling, Maki shoved her face into Kokichi's until their noses were touching. "Kaito's no longer alive to *care* if I kill you." Kokichi's eyes widened, bulging and bloodshot from the increased pressure inside his skull. His panicked breath was puffing against Maki's lips, and feeling his fear made her smile. "I promise you this: I *will* kill you, Kokichi. No matter what it takes or who stands in my way, I'm going to end this fucking killing game by *ending your life*."

Pure, animal terror flashed in Kokichi's eyes, and Maki felt his pulse hammering desperately against her fingers. "You – you'd really s-sacrifice – the lives of all your f-friends – just to kill me…? You'd kill – K-Kaito's s-sidekick…?!"

In that moment, Maki felt a yawning chasm open up inside her, and something dark and hideous twisted around her heart. *Yes,* she realized. *Because this is who I really am. A killer. A monster. A murderer. Whoever Kaito thought I was – whoever he thought I could be – that girl died in the hangar.*

Distantly, Maki heard voices – Kaito's voice, Shuichi's voice, the voices of everyone who'd died – and they were all calling out to her, pleading with her to stop – that she was better than this – yet Maki felt *nothing.* The serpent around her heart constricted, wringing out all the warmth and blood and humanity Kaito once believed in.

There was an audible crack as Maki finally crushed Kokichi's windpipe. The pulse fluttering against her fingers went dead, and an eerie calm washed over her. The assassin exhaled slowly, but her shuddering breath sharpened into a gasp when she felt a violent pain in her gut.

Glancing down, Maki realized Kokichi had somehow seized her knife from the floor and slashed her open. Maki tried to scream, but no sound came out. The assassin could do nothing but watch in mute horror as Kokichi's body dissolved into a dark sludge that squelched between her fingers.

Before Maki could release her grip on Kokichi, the tar slithered down her arm and seeped into the gash across her stomach. Like a heavy parasite, the darkness crawled deep inside her body, wriggling and writhing and –

There was a knock at the door.

"Maki…?" Keebo's voice filtered in around the edges. "Are you awake? It's time…"

Groaning, Maki cracked her eyes open. She was lying on the floor, her body drenched in sweat. Startled, she sat up, her eyes blown wide when she realized the bloodstains on the carpet were gone and –

Maki clapped her hands over her abdomen and felt nothing. No blood. No wound. No injuries of any kind. Her tattered knees still stung, however, and her palms were still bloodied. Proof that she *had* run from the hangar. Proof that –

I'm alive, Maki realized. …*And Kaito's dead.*

I'm alive…

And I'm the Blackened who killed Kaito…

Maki could still feel Kokichi's "gift" festering within her like yolk rotting inside a broken egg. The Supreme Leader's laughter was like a ringing in her ears that could never be silenced, and she knew that alarm would never cease until she removed the threat of Kokichi Oma from the world.

Maki stood up slowly, wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She killed Kaito, and now she was infected with Kokichi's despair. Maki had always known she was corrupted, but now she knew she was *irredeemable*. She'd killed the only person who'd ever believed in her – the *one person* who thought she could ever who thought she could ever be anything more than a monster. There was no coming back from what Maki had done, and she knew that, and she accepted that truth…

But there was at least one good thing left that she could do for this sick, meaningless world. It wouldn't redeem her, nor cleanse the darkness from her soul, but if there was any mercy

left inside Maki Harukawa, she knew what she had to do.

The assassin's blood-red eyes roved towards the door – towards the academy where her friends – her *only friends* – awaited her. They expected her to appear with a hammer in her hands and resolve thrumming in her veins, ready to valiantly launch into the plan that would save Kaito from Kokichi.

They had no idea how fruitless their endeavor was – how pointless. How *hopeless*. They had no way of knowing Kaito was dead, and that the cogs of the trial machine were already turning.

Maki could stop it, though. She could stop the game and grant her friends the mercy she no longer deserved. The assassin swallowed thickly, glancing down at her palms. They were already stained with blood – Ryoma's blood, Kaito's blood, and the blood of so many nameless, faceless worms. What was a little more blood atop a lifetime of evils?

Maki knew this was her last chance to finish this – her *only* chance to defeat the mastermind and end this farce once and for all.

Maki was going to kill Kokichi Oma in the class trial, and she was going to use the mastermind's very own game to end his life. Then, Maki was going to release everyone from Hell the only way she knew how… *Death.*

00:70

ORBYNIT

00:71

written by myaami

spot art by hellscap3

GLORY, IN HIS EYES

People say it's not polite to talk behind someone's back. Deceitful and untrustworthy is how you'd be described. Even more serious than *talking* behind the back, though, is *stabbing* in the back. Metaphorically and physically, this too, is typically considered traitorous.

But unfortunately for Kokichi, people never explicitly created an idiom for *shooting* people in the back. He always assumed that the transitive property would apply to situations like this, something like… using a weapon on someone in the back is bad, and since both knives and arrows are weapons, shooting arrows in the back is bad too. But no. No, this expression did not go without saying.

Shot two times in one day, he laments. *What luck.*

He's on his knees before he knows it, and still falling forward. He would kiss the grime off the hangar floor just inches from his lips if he thought it would stop the waves of pain. His veins burn in his fingertips, radiating out through his chest and stomach, and down to his toes. Kaito's arrow was nothing like this. Despite the discomfort Kokichi felt in his right arm, he still had the strength to push Kaito away, but now, he couldn't move if he tried.

He grits his teeth. He's gotten out of worse before. He's been strangled, paralyzed, and accused of murder, though technically he was only an accomplice to that, and only so as to avoid his own death. Getting shot is just another notch in his

indestructible belt. This is nothing.

As if responding to Kokichi's determination, he's gently manhandled into a more dignified seated position. Kaito, eyes full of concern and brows lifted in anticipation of a response, is next to him. He asked Kokichi a question, but Kokichi's ears went numb. At least, Kokichi figures that's the case. To him, it seems like Kaito is pantomiming; moving his mouth and putting on a show. To what end, Kokichi can't fathom, which is why he assumes it's his ears that aren't working, and not reality that is broken around him.

He's placed against the wall, and soon after, his ears resume normal functionality. "Poison" is the most concerning of the words spoken by Kaito and Maki who are loitering around him. At least Kokichi knows what this is now. The thought makes him wish his body would shut down again, but unfortunately, the protective state his mind entered is over. Pain and engagement with his senses returns in full force.

"He's not the mastermind!" Kaito shouts.

Kokichi nods. "Of course I'm not, you fool."

He wants to say this. He tries to. It must come out like a babble by the way Kaito and Maki stare at him.

"Are… are you sure?" Maki's crossbow falls slack to her side.

"If he dies, then you die too," Kaito says. "Can't you fix this?"

"Y-Yes, the antidote. Of course, I'll go bring it!" Maki turns and flees, the hangar door rumbling shut in her wake.

"Hear that, buddy? Everything's gonna be just fine." Kaito sticks out his hand with his thumb in the air, as if such a gesture will calm Kokichi's nerves.

Surprisingly, it does. God, he really must be dying.

But if he is dying now, he can use this. The mastermind is surely watching. They will think Kokichi is the victim of Maki's poison, but that's not the *only* verdict. The most plausible at the moment, perhaps, but Kokichi can throw things into chaos if he plays his cards close to the chest. A body is nothing but blood and bones, indiscernible from any other around it. A dead body can't speak their story, nor expose the name of their Blackened.

Yes, he can use this.

The last electrobomb is tucked away in his pocket. As soon as Maki returns, Kokichi will detonate it. He'll drink the antidote and concoct a new ending that will end this killing game once and for all.

He's thirsty. Despite drinking the nasty substance inside the bottle Maki retrieved, no amount of water can dislodge the sand scraping Kokichi's tongue. He refills the vial with tap water from the sink. It tastes like rust. Supposedly, the side effects will be mitigated within minutes, but Kokichi doesn't think he has the strength or dexterity to even hold a pen. Good thing he doesn't plan on writing a novel any time soon.

Maki cuts away Kokichi's shirt so she can get to his back and arm. She sets aside his bloodied clothes to later flush down the toilet, then turns her attention to the arrows.

"Take a deep breath," she advises. "This might be a little uncomfortable."

Pain takes his vision, and in that darkness, Kokichi hears the swinging of the reaper's scythe.

A gentle pressure around his chest soothes his racing heart. When his sight returns, Kokichi watches as Kaito carefully wraps bandages around the wounds.

"We owe you an apology," Kaito says.

"Damn right you do." The rust-like water threatens to come back up, but Kokichi forces it down and keeps the discomfort to himself.

Kaito and Maki open their mouths to offer their obligatory atonement, but Kokichi waves them off.

"Apology not accepted," he interjects, "but I'm not petty. I won't hold it against either of you. That said, you *do* owe me." He holds his bloodied right arm across his stomach, and

extends his left hand to them expectantly.Maki scoffs, but Kaito is quick to accept. “Better a deal with the devil you know than the one you don’t, right?” he says.

Kokichi laughs. “The devil? Me? Hardly, but I’m the next best thing.”

It doesn’t feel right to accept Maki’s hand in a proffering of peace when that same hand had been wrapped around his neck, but Kokichi forces the smile anyway because he knows he’s made a deal with far worse.

The bandages do nothing to mitigate Kokichi’s rising fever. The one wrapped around his arm had loosened from his climb into the Exisal’s cockpit, and while he wants nothing more than to tear it off, he retightens it. Good thing Kaito’s shot didn’t affect Kokichi’s dominant hand. Even though they agreed that Kaito would pilot, given he’s an actual pilot, Kokichi prepares himself to take over the Exisal just in case.

Kaito takes the time to point at the dashboard and above their heads to explain the controls. Kokichi doesn’t hear a word of it.

The Exisal is surprisingly spacious despite having Kaito pressed against his side. For the most part, anyway. There wasn’t much furnishing in the cockpit, other than the occasional pens and papers, and small gadgets here and there. Kaito said they were probably important, but there was something else tucked away at the back of the of the cockpit whose value Kokichi couldn’t fathom. It was small and draped in sparkling midnight fabric, and didn’t spring to life when they tested the Exisal earlier, but Kokichi didn’t have time to clear it out before climbing in. Whatever it is, it makes him uncomfortable. It takes up too

much space.

Kokichi shakes his head. The show is about to start. Now is not the time for distractions.

The hangar door creaks open and the rest of their class file in. It’s a gruesome scene, Kokichi has to admit. He did a good job setting it up. The press is clamped shut with blood pouring out, soaking Kaito’s jacket with the one lonely sleeve hanging out.

Watching their reactions is hard. Tears spill down Shuichi’s face, and Keebo covers his mouth and turns away. Maki pretends to be impassive, knowing what actually happened; however, one of their reactions betrays them. Distress at the forefront, but… but, something else, too. Something Kokichi’s had an inkling about for a while now. He scribbles the thought on his infinitely growing list of things that only he can do.

A low hum rumbles from somewhere in the Exisal.

“Not yet!” Kokichi whispers aggressively at Kaito. “Turn it off! It’s too soon to show our faces!”

“Calm down, man! I didn’t touch anything.” Kaito whispers back, hands in the air.

Kokichi looks behind him. Everything would be destroyed if they were given away too soon. Did the sound come from the thing under the drape?

“I know the plan,” Kaito assures. “I’m not gonna sabotage it. We’re in this together.”

Kokichi reaches for the water bottle he stowed away and takes a long swig. Kaito’s right. Kokichi needs to calm down.

He has absolute faith in his ability to bring this trial to the conclusion it deserves.

He swallows down a cough and tries to focus his attention on the press, but finds his attention scattered and fixated on everywhere but there.

Everyone is surprised when both Kaito and Kokichi's voices come out of the Exisal. All according to plan.

It honestly isn't so bad swapping back and forth with Kaito, each of them playing the bad guy and blaming the other. All in good fun, of course. Never mind the accommodations. The Exisal obviously was not meant to accommodate two bodies, setting aside the sweltering heat coming from whatever that thing is at the back of the Exisal. Kokichi should have taken more time to try and push it out. He's almost drained his water bottle and can't afford to lose focus just because of a little dehydration.

"Could there have been a third body put under the press?" Shuichi asks his classmates.

"A third makes sense since we heard both Kaito and Kokichi speaking," Himiko says.

"So who?" Keebo asks. "One of the earlier victims?"

"I don't like that idea," Tsumugi says. "It's too convenient. We should focus on the evidence we do have."

Maki glances to the side, trying her best hand at acting, but she was never great at hiding her true emotions. She

understands the plan the three of them formulated, but she's having trouble doing it convincingly.

Kokichi takes a sip of water while the video screen descends from the darkness above the trial grounds. The drink goes down like sand mixed with iron.

"You alright?" Kaito asks in his inside voice as the discussion pauses while the class watches the death video Kokichi concocted. Kokichi doesn't need to watch because he already knows exactly what it shows.

"'Course," Kokichi says, drawing in a ragged breath. "As well as I can, considering the antidote was garbage."

"Are you sure you drank all of it?"

Kokichi scoffs. Of course he drank all of it. Every single drop. Each time his heart beats, it pumps that vile mixture through his veins, the rhythm discordant as it slows further and further behind the steady metronome of where it should be.

He took what was given to him. He didn't want to, but he took it anyway.

The audio from the death video playing in the trial grounds suddenly blasts at full volume inside the Exisal. The mechanical whirling of the press is amplified, loud enough to make Kokichi think he is there in the hangar again. The noise isn't coming from the Exisal's speakers, but from the thing taking up most of the space in their small confines. It hammers vibrations against Kokichi's hands in particular, both index fingers straining as if pushing down against something, something horrible, but he can't stop until just the right moment—and it has to be at *just* the right moment—and then, miraculously, the vibrations and

the pressure let up.

He holds a hand to his heart and turns around, but there's nothing there now. The midnight curtain covering up those dark machinations is no longer there.

Kokichi sighs, relieved, until he realizes that it isn't truly gone. He hasn't banished it from the Exisal with his wishful thinking. The thing lurks in the space above him now.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Kaito asks him.

"I literally wrote the script for this," Kokichi says.

I don't have a choice, he thinks. *You never gave me one.*

Kokichi accepts the mic from Kaito as the discussion in the trial grounds continues in full force. Kaito had been able to return the topic of discussion to the major oversight in the trial, and just like that, Kokichi removes one lingering item from his check-list.

"Who is under the press?" Tsumugi insists. "There are no extra bodies."

"How can you be so sure?" Kokichi asks cautiously so as not to tip the scale prematurely.

"The bodies we've seen were all taken away," Tsumugi claims. "There's nowhere to keep them here within the academy walls."

"So you believe that something is impossible even though we haven't gotten confirmation from Monokuma," Kokichi muses. "Monokuma doesn't lie, but he also doesn't give out

information freely. You're not presenting this as a theory, Tsumugi. You're implying this is fact."

Tsumugi narrows her eyes and bites the edge of her nail.

"Only the real mastermind would definitively know if the bodies were taken away," Kokichi closes in, grin splitting his face. "Aww, you overplayed your hand. There, there. It's not the first time you've misled us based on secret knowledge."

There was always something about Tsumugi that threw Kokichi for a loop. Her perfectly plain persona is meant to give her enough of a personality, but not enough to be particularly interesting nor to draw attention to herself. There's no reason anyone would be so passive in the face of death unless they knew more.

That time when Shuichi lied in Miu's trial about going up to the rooftop to meet Kokichi… Tsumugi knew that was a lie, but she

didn't push back against Shuichi because she wanted to see what would happen. To make it interesting.

"The mastermind is you, Tsumugi."

Kokichi relinquishes control back to Kaito to do the explaining, though Kokichi doesn't sit by idly to rest. He can't. The space in the Exisal is filled to the brim, forcing a heavy and impossible weight down upon him. It threatens to burst into the courtroom, so Kokichi keeps his head forward, not daring to set his eyes anywhere above the horizon.

The temperature plummeted after his accusation of Tsumugi. He removes the bandage from his arm and examines it. It's completely clean. He uses it to wipe the sweat from his face.

Kaito's logic explaining Tsumugi's betrayal is reasonable. He couldn't have done it without Kokichi's deductions—it's a good thing Kokichi wrote that script before the trial began—and the class is quick to believe.

They hold an impromptu vote on Tsumugi's role as the mastermind, and when they are all in agreement, they move on to solve the remaining mystery at hand.

"So it's not a third body," Maki says, rallying support for their desired verdict. "That means it's Kokichi or Kaito. And I… I admit I killed Kaito with the second poisoned arrow. Kokichi drank the antidote. It's Kokichi in the Exisal."

Something about that statement feels peculiar. *A second poisoned arrow?* Kokichi inspects the places he was shot. Once in the arm by Kaito, and once in the back by Maki. But she only had one poisoned arrow, not two, right? As for the antidote,

yes, he did drink it.

Didn't he?

His body starts shaking as their tactic of introducing new evidence is finally questioned. Kokichi's death video is played once more on the screen that slowly descends from the sky.

"See there?" Shuichi says. "The camera pauses. That's when the culprit switched. The fact that the face is occluded reveals the true victim. Look! Look there above you and see the truth with your own eyes!"

No! Kokichi cannot look up. There is *something* lurking there that he does not want to see.

"A lie!" Maki shouts. "Stop deceiving yourself."

Shuichi examines the Exisal, and Kokichi thinks he sees just how close Kokichi is to breaking.

Shuichi averts his eyes."You're… you're right Maki. I just didn't want to admit it and get you killed too." He steels himself and seals their fate. "Maki is the Blackened who killed Kaito."

And just like that, the show is over. Kokichi's script was perfect, leading them to arrive at the wrong answer—that Kaito died—when Kaito is alive and well, laughing so hard it sounds like sobbing. The laughter bubbles through Kokichi's chest too, mixing with the tears running down his face and the nausea wracking his body. It's a well earned victory at the cost of his blood, sweat, and tears.

Kokichi decides to take a break while the trial wraps up. The floor is freezing cold as he lays down. His teeth are clattering.

He brings the warm fabric of Kaito's sparkling midnight coat around his waist, feeling the silk against the wound on his back. If he could, he would slip his arms into the sleeves, but that's impossible. The action would ruin everything he is working towards. It would foil every deception he has so carefully scripted. Besides, Kokichi can't really bring himself to move to do it.

He hears Kaito's voice call his name from far, far away.

He closes his eyes. Finally, he was going home.

Kokichi faces the midnight curtain that once covered the looming thing in the back of the Exisal. He understands now. Why didn't he recognize it before? This is the divider between life as he knows it, and the lies told to him from beyond.

He pushes it aside to reveal the exit at the end of the death road. The door is wide open, leading to a beautiful paradise in the world outside. No burning and broken buildings amidst a rubble landscape. Instead, as far as the eye can see is lush and vibrant greenery teaming with life. Kokichi is glad he lived long enough to see it.

Everyone is waiting for him down the path ahead. Himiko is spinning in a circle with Tenko and Angie. Kaede locks arms with Rantaro and Shuichi as they head towards Kirumi and Ryoma. Kiyo stands off to the side watching with a fond expression, and Maki, Kaito, and Keebo look up at the open and clear sky. Gonta runs towards Kokichi, laughing and waving, pulling Miu behind him.

Funny to think how they were all strangers not too long ago. Strangers who quickly became friends of a sort and who

survived this maddening killing game without taking a single life.

Kokichi steps across the threshold to take his place among them.

A hand violently yanks him back.

"Really, Kokichi, you're not one to leave things unanswered."

Kokichi growls. "You lost, Tsumugi. Let it go."

"*Who was under the press?*" she hisses. "I think you know the true answer."

As Kokichi watches everyone explore their well earned freedom, the question repeats in his mind. Who was under the press? Who *was* it?

Up ahead, Kaito starts coughing. Maki and Shuichi rush to his side.

The question was never fully addressed in the trial—where the body and all that blood came from—but there's only one person it could have been.

Keebo holds a hand to his head. Himiko rings her hat in her hands. Everyone else—Gonta, Miu, everyone—is dead and lying on the ground. They never made it out alive.

Everything would be ruined if Kokichi considered the possibility, but dammit, things are already ruined, aren't they?

Who was under the press?

Who was under the press?

Who *is* under the press?

It's… it's him. Isn't it?

The glowing sun turns dark and cold. His white jacket is gone, and he is instead wrapped loosely in a coat not his own, gazing at himself reflected back from a flat surface of uncaring metal. This is the Thing that had been looming around him all this time. This is the reason he could not feel at peace and the reason he could not look up, as it would have exposed the lie his poisoned mind concocted long before he was ready to admit it to himself.

He's been a dead man walking in a daydream all this time. None of it was real.

But no, that's not true. Some of it was real. It had to be.

He really did give Kaito the antidote when Maki shot him with her final arrow. An arrow that wasn't fired in his fantasy. His mind must have tried to imagine a better world, a more caring one where people aren't so easily persuaded by the mastermind to kill.

Kokichi never drank the antidote. The tip of the bottle had only ever graced his lips in another well crafted deception. But he really did write a thousand word script for Kaito to use to trick the mastermind. And then he really did stop the press just before it crushed Kaito so they could switch places.

All of that was important, and in fact, Kokichi is already ahead of the script. He knows exactly who has been deceiving them. That deduction only occurred as a result of his poison-induced

fantasy, but he's one hundred percent certain. He knows the identity of the mastermind.

"I'm going to start it up," Kaito says. From the distance and direction of his voice, he must be standing at the controls of the hydraulic press. "Kokichi… thank you. For giving them a chance."

The press motor starts to whirl.

No, no, no. Kokichi can't go out like this. He can give them more than a *chance*. He can give them the truth.

"I know who!" Kokichi says. Damnit, he's so weak. Just like at parts of his dream, he doesn't know if he's properly producing sound. Fuck. His failing body cannot be the reason they lose this game.

He wiggles his arm that's out of view of the camera recording his death to make sure he can still move. Yes, he can.

The press starts its descent.

He tries a hum, a sound from the back of his throat but without vocals. He thinks it's loud enough to hear, but it needs to reach Kaito's ears.

"Tsumugi!" he shouts. "Liar!" he screams.

The motor whirls loudly.

He screams it again and again, until he realizes that his mouth is hardly even open. Kokichi hasn't said a word.

The game is lost, his glorious deductions only known to himself.

The press groans for a moment longer until all at once, its cruel machinations come to a stop.

written by possiblycatgirl

IN PLAIN SIGHT

Leaving the boisterous environment that surrounded both Maki and Kaito was like a drain on Shuichi. All at once he was faced with their harsh reality as he mindlessly walked under the starry sky. Not even the sound of crickets kept him company.

Everything about this game was making things too confusing. He didn't even know where to start on apologizing to Kaito. Not that he felt he should have to apologize. Shuichi shouldn't have anything to feel sorry for. It was a class trial, and Gonta had committed a murder, whether Kaito accepted that or not. Inwardly, Shuichi sighed at the petty thought spiral. Kokichi would make fun of him endlessly for his hypocrisy. If anyone could find him, that is.

This was all starting to give Shuichi a headache. He wasn't near the dorms by any means, and was about to turn in his tracks when he spotted Tsumugi. Although concerned to see her awake, it wasn't surprising given everyone's feelings about the game. Shuichi was tempted to just walk off--

Until he saw that expression on her face; her eyebrows furrowed and her mouth tugged downward in a frown. Even after all the gruesome things the trials had brought, he'd never seen Tsumugi of all people make such an irritated face.

"Shirogane-san?" Shuichi called, "Are you okay?"

Tsumugi backed away as she started, a panic stricken

expression on her face as she turned to face Shuichi. She gave a disgruntled huff when she realized it was only him. "D- don't sneak up on me like that, please!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to..." He trailed off, looking to the ground.

It was only then when he realized where they were, and subsequently what had Tsumugi scowling. The rock that Kokichi had written on proclaiming he was the mastermind glinted in the starlight.

Was that what Tsumugi had looked so upset over? Kokichi had really thrown them for a loop, but to be honest… It was quite difficult to imagine him truly being the mastermind.

"No, it's my fault for overreacting. I'm just frustrated about all of this. And Kokichi…" She crossed her arms with a sigh, a familiar anxiety in her eyes. "We should've guessed he was the mastermind all along."

"Maybe..."

Shuichi wasn't about to defend Kokichi after relentlessly mocking Kaito for believing in Gonta until the very end, but he couldn't help but feel doubtful of what Kokichi had told them. So far the mastermind had been someone determined to be kept out of sight, their meddling subtle and abrupt. Kokichi had kept them on their toes and was nowhere to be found only now.

"I don't know about Ouma-kun's true intentions, but I don't think we should believe he's the mastermind right away." Shuichi admittedly couldn't yet figure out the meaning behind any of Kokichi's cryptic words. He couldn't see Tsumugi's expression as she turned back to the stone slab.

"You really shouldn't be so trusting." Her voice was low, before she added more lightly, "Ah, but we can't give up no matter what the truth is, obviously. Our classmates depend on you, Saihara-san."

Shuichi paused, wondering why he felt that Tsumugi's words sounded forced. Perhaps he'd overstepped by insinuating his doubts about Kokichi's mastermind status. With all the tension in the air, it's understandable she'd be wary of the first person who blatantly confessed to it all.

Everything about being a detective had made him throw someone in the line of fire so far.

"Of course, I'll try." He tried to give her a reassuring smile, not missing the look of triumph on her face. It seemed he'd said something right, at least.

"We'll see through this 'til the end together! Just like one of my favorite characters..." Tsumugi startled rambling as if nothing had happened. Despite her meek appearance, not as if Shuichi's was any less plain, she was able to shift the atmosphere in a second.

Even though Shuichi couldn't keep up with exactly what she was talking about, he at least tried to listen. He didn't think he could bear to have any more of his friends dislike him and to feel so useless in terms of keeping his classmates together. Maybe if he had some semblance of controlling the atmosphere like Tsumugi, he'd be able to actually help his classmates.

Kaede could've done it. There was no time to dwell on that, though.

Shuichi was surprised when he found himself closer to the dorms now, not having realized that the girl had been essentially leading him while talking. After everything, he was probably just too tired to have noticed.

Still, as the two went their separate ways, Shuichi felt like he had missed something. Though he hadn't been investigating anything, his thoughts kept spiraling and hitting a roadblock, but he couldn't be sure of what it was.

Shuichi's body felt heavy as he stared up at the starlit sky once more. Even though the dome twinkled brightly, but with their entire situation shrouded in darkness, the stars felt like eyes upon him. Why did something about his and Tsumugi's exchange leave such a bad taste in his mouth?

Sighing, Shuichi considered he was probably-- was definitely overthinking things. For all he knew, the truth of this whole thing could be staring right at them.

written by saimatsushipper

MISTER SUSPECT

A cage of wire,
A cage of steel.
He could hear their panic and cries.

A thought of remorse,
A thought of regret.
Would his grandparents be proud of what he's become?

A memory of anger,
A memory of hurt.
This was all going according to his plan.

A line of distrust,
A line of worry.
No one could trust each other.

A search of silence,
A search of loneliness.
Everyone was investigating solo this time.

A breath of panic,
A breath of fear.
He hoped they would stay far away.

A swear of silence,
A swear of nervousness.
He knew how close he was to the crime scene.

A step of truth,
A step of courage.
He could hear his sidekick muttering.

A bear of white,
A bear of black.
Who knew he could be quite useful.

A hush of alibis,
A hush of discussions.
He could barely hear what they said.

A bell of doom,
A bell of dread.
It was time to head over to the grounds.

A cough of pain,
A cough of splatters.
He knew his time was fast approaching.

A trial of lies,
A trial of deceit.
He knew what was awaiting the others.

A tale of pain,
A tale of tricks.
He could hear their voices from within the mech.

A voice of hope,
A voice of despair.
The victim was still unknown to their eyes.

A script of lines,
A script of facades.
He waited while they discussed a lie.

A flash of boredom,
A flash of anger.
He winced in disgust as he skimmed his words.

A mind of wisdom,
A mind of logic.
His sidekick was smart to see through it all.

A friend of help,
A friend of smarts.
He kind of felt bad for tricking him like this.

A debate of the mind,
A debate of bullets.
They found the clothes he flushed in the toilet.

A stain of water,
A stain of blood.
His mind could never be persuaded.

A heartbeat of guilt,
A heartbeat of anger.
He was unsure if that was enough to make amends.

A spot of details,
A spot of counterpoint.
But her words proved she wasn't swayed.

A voice of confidence,
A voice of stubbornness.
His sidekick could never use emotions as evidence.

A sleeve of pink,
A sleeve of style.
He did have a peculiar way of dressing.

But then there was her.

The one who was trained to kill.

He knew what happened last night.

Especially with how she reacted.

She thought it was her fault.

He hated that thought.

The guilt unfolded.

His heart ached.

His skin paled.

But he couldn't falter.

He couldn't show emotion.

He had to keep up the act.

Especially for his good friends.

Then he heard it.

A voice calling him out.

A voice of malice and trickery.

A voice distracting his thoughts.

A voice from a familiar someone.

"Hey Mister Suspect! That's your cue!"

And with a deep swallow of blood, he ventured out in his mechanical shell.

written by lunarnaiad

ANYTHING BUT

The sky was pitch black, swirling with a tangle of bright stars and unfamiliar constellations. There was not a single cloud in sight, flaunting the bold-faced lie looming high above Shuichi's head. Part of him wondered how the ship facilitated changes between night and day, but not enough to linger on the thought for too long.

Under normal circumstances, he would have considered this a perfect evening. But Shuichi had grown far too jaded to appreciate any remnants of beauty still lurking around here. Instead of providing solace, the clear sky and mild weather just felt intensely oppressive. They were subtle reminders of the deception at work, and the sick game they were forced to continue playing.

Since he wasn't in the mood for spiteful stargazing, he chose to pace around campus instead. He tried to follow sidewalks in well-lit areas to keep from tripping over his own feet. It might not have been necessary, since the grassy areas were infuriatingly well-manicured. Nevertheless, it provided temporary peace of mind.

Although it was well past midnight, Shuichi's mind was racing. Kaito had been locked in the Exisal hangar for almost a full day now with no hope of release. He had been forcibly taken from their friends while in a vulnerable state and put in an even more dangerous situation.

It was hard to keep from wondering what had made Kaito sick, and if being locked up would exacerbate the problem.

Even though he claimed to be in good health, no one fully believed him. His boisterous laughter and fierce insistence may have assuaged their fears, but only briefly.

Shuichi could feel himself panicking but hesitated to consider this an emergency. Kokichi was just too much of an enigma. Despite everything he had done to harm their friends, accepting him as the villain still didn't feel right. There were too many parts of his story that simply didn't add up, which left Shuichi feeling anxious and reluctant.

But this game didn't allow for ambivalence.

He may not have believed Kokichi's story, but that didn't mean he trusted him. His reclusive tendencies and childish outbursts made it difficult to understand or even converse with him. While Shuichi wanted to believe he wouldn't commit murder, he just couldn't be sure. For now, the safest course of action would be to free Kaito and stay away from him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shuichi spotted the silhouette of another person. Their shadow bobbed and weaved on the concrete, even though their actual feet moved in impeccably smooth strides. Tendrils of long hair trailed behind them, sticking together in oversized pigtails and wavy clumps.

He was able to identify the figure based on those traits alone. Maki had always been unique, even among ultimates. She was capable of things he couldn't even fathom, and the sole reason their friend group remained intact. Her rationality had kept them from saying anything they might regret several times already. While Shuichi was grateful to her, it also left him

feeling a little ashamed. Because of that, approaching her was difficult.

Before Shuichi could consider what to say, he became struck by how quickly she was walking and the direction she was headed. If Maki noticed him, she clearly wasn't interested in stopping to chat. There was a bag slung over her shoulder and another in hand, both black with mesh straps and plenty of buckles. It didn't take long for Shuichi to deduce where he had seen them before, to recognize their shape and purpose.

She was carrying weapons.

His temperature dropped, a sharp chill racing down his spine. Any residual awkwardness fell to the wayside, being usurped by pure adrenaline. Instead of worrying about tactful conversation, he became more concerned with stopping her… before it was too late.

Shuichi's feet practically flew from the concrete as he broke into a clumsy sprint. Logically, he knew his steps must have been noisy. However, his mind struggled to separate the clicks of heels from the rapid heartbeat ripping through his eardrums. It just became a mangled cacophony of sensation, a nauseating tempo of despair. Even gentle breezes seemed to whip at his cheeks, which only furthered the overstimulation and panic.

He somehow managed to reach her much quicker than expected. But catching up to Maki was only half the battle. Shuichi still needed to convince her to talk to him, and trying to stop Maki was like trying to stop a moving train. Not to mention the ragged breaths still tearing through his throat, which only made it more difficult to speak.

She must have pitied him and accepted a pathetic wheeze

as reason enough to pause. But even though she had decided to spare him a moment, she didn't look happy about it. Maki's brow was furrowed and her expression cold, bearing not even a hint of pliability. She was already telling him to *butt out*, without saying anything at all.

The sheer hostility left Shuichi feeling even more distraught. But in spite of his fear, he drank in a gulp of cool night air and persevered. "W-Where are you going? What are you doing?!" He sputtered, unable to verbalize anything more cogent.

"I'm going to get Kaito," Maki stated flatly, offering no further explanation. Her gaze was clear and hardened by resolve, flickering with hints of rage. It felt as though she was looking past him, actively casting him from her mind. She clearly planned to follow through with this, regardless of anything he had to say. "Go back to your room, Shuichi."

When met with such harsh determination, it was easy to feel small. He began wondering if there was any point in trying to end the cycle of violence, when it just kept repeating on an endless loop. Perhaps if this were someone else, he could have allowed himself to cower beneath the strength of their will. But this was *Maki*, and he couldn't stand the thought of losing her to rash decisions made out of fear.

So Shuichi tightened his fists and corrected his posture. Even though neither of them had said anything, they both knew what she was planning to do. He couldn't just fall back and watch it happen.

"This isn't going to solve anything," he whispered, tepid yet firm. "The only way to get out of here is by working together. You *know* that."

"You and Kaito… you're both too idealistic," she practically spat. Her hand tightened around one of the bags, just in case he tried to take it. "We can't just keep waiting around anymore. Kokichi is a threat."

Although her anger was apparent, she never raised her voice. It stayed an urgent whisper, harsh yet quiet enough to not draw attention. Perhaps she was trying to protect Shuichi from being implicated in the inevitable trial to come.

His throat became uncomfortably tight and dry. Even though he could understand what Maki was saying, something about it felt horribly wrong.

"M-Maybe I am too idealistic," Shuichi began calmly in an attempt to reason with her. "But something still doesn't feel right. I don't think Kokichi would actually—"

"Did you already forget about what happened to Gonta?" Maki asked, using the painful reminder to shut him up. Traces of guilt flickered in those crimson irises as they darted about, but it was promptly extinguished. "I know you thought we could survive this by working together, but you're wrong. Some of our friends… were never really friends at all."

Shuichi had already come to the same realization many times over. It always struck when his heart was heavy with despair, reminding him that even the kindest people could not be trusted. When it came down to it, they would always act on their own self-interest. But accepting that would mean losing trust in everyone who remained and discarding the memories of those cherished friendships. He didn't want to do that, because in spite of it all… he still believed those bonds *meant* something. All of them.

"That's not true," Shuichi countered in a desperate attempt to vocalize those last shreds of hope. "If it weren't for Monokuma, none of this would have ever happened! Our friends weren't bad people. They were just put in a bad situation."

He thought Maki would understand this better than anyone, given her past. Unless she considered herself an irredeemable monster, she should have been able to sympathize with him.

Her mouth twisted into the smallest hint of a frown. In spite of everything, it seemed his determination managed to crack her resolve. Whether it would be enough to stop her… was yet to be determined.

"You're idealizing again," Maki grumbled impatiently, sounding less sure of herself. "I don't know about everyone else, but Kokichi is dangerous. You can't bargain with people like him. The more you try… the more likely someone is to get hurt."

Shuichi winced, but he wasn't entirely sure why. Perhaps he knew she was right and feared Kokichi just as much. Regardless, he still couldn't rationalize trying to end violence with more violence. Even if Kokichi truly was nothing more than a rotten villain, killing him wouldn't put an end to this.

It would just result in Maki's execution, or worse.

Shuichi must have wasted too much time contemplating because she mistook the silence for an end to their conversation. She took a few steps forward, attempting to skirt around him and continue the way she was headed. And honestly… he couldn't blame her.

Looking back on it, Shuichi hadn't managed to say much of anything important. The words he had intended to persuade

her with felt hollow, and his resolution was weak. So when he reached for the corner of the bag in her arm, even he was surprised. The sheathed metal dug into the heel of his hand, but thankfully it didn't hurt.

Maki seemed surprised enough to stop and try to shake him off. Her patience must have been wearing thin because her face expression darkened more quickly than ever.

"Let go," she commanded icily. One of her hands curled open but hesitated to lunge forward.

Honestly, Shuichi was scared. Her eyes pierced his skin like daggers, and her readiness to strike left him shaken. Even though they couldn't agree on how to solve this, he never expected to be threatened.

This was one of his closest friends, and he was afraid of her. Truly, deeply afraid.

…Did they even trust each other?

Maki used the moment of weakness to shake free from his grip. She brushed past Shuichi before he could even blink, safely putting herself out of reach.

"Just go back to bed," she whispered, more gently than before. It sounded like she was trying to reassure him this time rather than control him with fear. "I'll take care of all the ugly stuff. I'm used to it."

Even though they were meant to be comforting, those words just made him feel worse. They settled in his heart like a lead weight, or a solemn prophecy that couldn't be fought. Fragments of fear began to taint his thoughts, plague his

conscience, and crumble his resolve.

There was nothing else to say.

Maki shouldn't have to feel responsible for their safety. No one should have to die for another to live. There shouldn't be any more trials.

But what right did he have to even feel that way?

He was powerless.

Just someone to pick up all of the pieces, after damage had already been done.

written by melodysnowflake

MEMORIES UNDER THE STARS

Maki gazed up at the dark night sky, which was speckled with stars, not really seeing it. It was the first night after Kaito had been taken hostage and they had learned the horrible truth. They were the only survivors of humanity. Shuichi locked himself in his room and refused to answer when she rang the doorbell, so she sat in the courtyard alone.

She subconsciously raised both of her hands and fiddled with her right pigtail, combing through the strands and adjusting their positions. She should not have survived, not after she had taken so many lives in the past. It was a cruel irony, it just wasn't fair...

"Maki?"

A small voice jolted the assassin out of her thoughts, and she dropped her hands to her sides. She looked around and was surprised to see Himiko standing before her, looking down at where she sat.

"Himiko?" Maki asked, "what are you doing up at this hour?"

"I... Couldn't sleep," the mage admitted, which was unusual coming from her. "May I join you?"

In the past, Maki would have said no. She didn't know Himiko too well, and she was having a private moment. But now, the assassin was way too tired to refuse anything.

"Sure," Maki replied, her shoulders slumping as she let out a soft sigh. She gestured to the ground beside her.

"Thank you," Himiko said with a small smile of relief.

She settled herself down, and for a few minutes, the two girls simply sat in silence, gazing up at the fake, starry sky.

"You're thinking about them too, aren't you? The people we left behind?" Himiko asked after a long silence.

"Yeah," Maki confessed softly, fiddling with her hair again. "It isn't fair that we got to survive instead of them."

"I didn't even know where my master was when the apocalypse happened," Himiko said, tears welling up in her eyes. "I can't accept that he… that he died. I was thinking about it too much, and I couldn't get to sleep."

She sniffled and several tears streamed down her cheeks.

Maki felt a wave of empathy towards the girl. "I know how you feel," she agreed. "The kids at my orphanage... they deserved to live more than I did. They had never done anything wrong while I've taken so many lives."

"You must've been really close to them, they must've been like your family the same way my master was to me", Himiko replied, more tears spilling from her eyes.

"They were." Maki's voice cracked, her eyes redder than usual. She stopped combing through her pigtail and merely gripped it with her right hand instead, squeezing it tightly. "Especially one girl. She was a friend I had since childhood, we practically grew up together.. She didn't deserve to die so early, she died even before the apocalypse, it was not her time yet..."

She stopped talking, feeling herself getting teary-eyed. Her right hand fell onto her lap as she gazed at Himiko. Maki wasn't sure exactly why she was telling her all this. Perhaps she had been holding it all in for too long.

"It's not fair," Himiko agreed, as Maki let a few tears of her own escape. "Apart from all those people, our friends who escaped with us shouldn't have died either. Angie, Tenko..."

Maki nodded. "And now Kaito is being held hostage by the mastermind," she finished, finally breaking down into frustrated sobs. "Who knows what could happen to him."

Wordlessly, Himiko reached out and pulled Maki into a gentle embrace. She could not stand to see the latter as upset as she was, and she desperately needed a hug herself.

The assassin tensed up for a moment at the physical touch, but then sighed, relaxing into it. She wasn't normally a physically affectionate person, but as she leaned into Himiko's arms, she realised she needed this.

Himiko burried her face into Maki's shoulder, crying her heart out. The assassin struggled with her emotions for a few more moments, before allowing herself to do the same.

For a few more minutes, they simply sat there, holding each other close, letting out all their grief and sorrow.
At last, Himiko said, "I'm glad I don't have to be alone tonight, Maki."

Maki didn't say anything at first, concentrating on letting her tears fall and on the comforting feeling of being in someone's arms. Finally, she replied, "Me too."

written by rose

OUR INTENTIONS ALMOST CROSSED SWORDS

It was so quiet that Yumeno heard the metal pipes rattling inside the walls. Her footsteps echoed as she traversed the third floor, threatening to reveal her location. She hunched, her shoulders curving inward. Her eyes flitted, watching the shadows crawling across the walls, the dim lights betraying her as outlines formed in the corners of her vision. But when she turned, she was alone.

It was as if the entire prison had been emptied of its students. Yumeno dug her knuckles over her heart. It thudded with the threat of piercing through her chest. Her shallow breaths tickled her chapped lips and leaned against the wall to regain control of her lungs. Pressing both hands to her chest, she waited in the dimness, feeling her back sliding down until she realized she was sitting on the dusty, dirty floor.

Threading her fingers through her hair, Yumeno massaged her temples. Although it was silent, there was a swirling cacophony. It cocooned her mind in a typhoon of confusing revelations and misdirection, battering her brain until it was nothing more than pulp. Yumeno groaned, her leg bouncing as her ears rang. A sudden, throbbing case of tinnitus whirred like sirens around her empty thoughts.

"Shut up, all of you," she muttered, tapping the bottom of her skull. She dug in her fingers, feeling like she would have pierced into her head like screws through a wooden plank. Grinding her molars, she pulled her knees to her chest. An even pulse

throbbed behind her eyelids, the drumbeat to her migraine.

Whenever stressed, Angie offered to listen to her woes. Any ailments afflicting her were soothed by Angie's words and embrace. Yumeno remembered the steady, rhythmic tempo of her heartbeat. It was a constant, warm reassurance as Angie prayed.

But Angie had joined her God. And when Yumeno tried bringing her hands together, blinking open her eyes, her fingers twitched. They slipped past one another, landing on her knobby knees. Confusion escaped her in a groan. She clapped her hands together and balked at the resounding echo like a clamoring cymbal in an empty auditorium. Yumeno cupped her mouth and strained her ears, but unlike Angie, who heard commands from one above all, she abandoned herself to the dismal silence.

Everything and everyone had fallen apart. Their unity, their friendships, they had capsized, and the ship was still sinking. As the others were lost in the waves, Yumeno tried staying afloat. But without a lifejacket, she struggled to keep her head above water.

Slowly, Yumeno stood. She breathed through her mouth, savoring the stale air. She knew she needed to do *something*, even if she was not certain what *something* was. Investigating was her best bet for any semblance of an answer. She had entrusted that to Saihara, who had guided them through the class trials. But he had gone off her radar along with everyone else, abandoning Yumeno to fend for herself in the shadows of the academy.

"This is the third floor," she muttered, peering up the hall, "so maybe, um, maybe there's something here that was missed.

Yeah, maybe. Just wish I knew where to start."

Her legs quivered as she inched forward. There was an urge to retreat to her research lab, but nothing benefitted her by hiding. If anything, she feared being pinpointed as a culprit simply because she was without an alibi. Even though she lacked one *now,* her mind replaying the body discovery announcement chime, Yumeno shoved aside her woes and continued onward.

The lights flickered. Her footsteps caused the metal flooring to creak. Whatever she was searching for was beyond her. The rooms she inspected lacked anything outwardly obvious as suspicious, her blood boiling and her skin flushing. Yumeno dragged herself out of one door and onto the next, again and again.

The broom closet reminded her too much of Tojo's research lab. There were brooms in one corner and mops in the other. An assortment of buckets on the shelves distorted her reflection. Sprays filled with cleaning fluids lined the top shelf, and she recognized the brands Tojo used. The bottle in the corner was for polishing the dishes she had set, plated with meals she served everyone. There still existed a part within Yumeno that hadn't accepted Tojo would have sacrificed everyone. The reminders of her fallen friend overwhelmed her, as if she smelled something rotten. Yumeno pivoted on her heels, her balance suddenly lost in her spin, as if she was the one falling to her death.

Yumeno leaned out, finding nothing to her left, but her right proved fortuitous. She wondered how she could have missed hearing her. There, fumbling with her Monopad, was Harukawa. She stomped toward her research lab, her eyes laser-focused on the tablet, seemingly unaware Yumeno had

stepped into the hallway.

A surge of relief coursing through her, she cried, "Harukawa!"

Harukawa whipped her head up. Her hand shot for her skirt. With a glint of metal brandishing, she pounced. Her vibrant, scarlet eyes shined like the knife she raised, ready to impale. Yumeno screeched, flailing her arms. Craning her head away, her neck was exposed, just waiting to be pierced.

Memories of Ouma struggling in Harukawa's grasp flitted across her mind. Harukawa had squeezed, tight enough for her knuckles to burn white, her tendons having stretched to their limits. All the while, Ouma had sneered, but his neck was constricted, pinched as if it would pop off had Harukawa applied just the slightest bit of pressure.

Now in Harukawa's crosshairs, an overwhelming terror encompassed her. Yumeno wondered if she could have empathized with him.

Her footsteps slowed to a crawl. Harukawa stopped. Yumeno cracked open an eye. Both of their breathing was heavy, surprising Yumeno. Harukawa was athletic, and a short sprint wouldn't have made her pant like she had run a mile.

"Yumeno." Harukawa spat out her name like a wad of chewed-up gum. Her gaze darted from side to side, as if expecting someone to emerge from the woodwork.

Yumeno bunched the fabric of the skirt between her hands. She tried following Harukawa's gaze, but the hallway was empty. Only shadows crawled across the floor, walls, and Harukawa's body.

Harukawa slipped her knife into a leather scabbard clipped around her thigh. Yumeno had wondered where she kept it, making a mental note of its location. In silence, they stared at each other, Yumeno still catching her breath. She searched for anything to say, but as if stricken with dehydration, her tongue shriveled. She worked her jaw, and nothing intelligent sounded. Digging her nail-bitten fingers into her palms, she bowed her head and managed to mutter an apology.

"I-I didn't mean-I didn't mean to, uh, startle you," she said, her cap casting a cool shadow across her expression.

Harukawa waited, then blew out a puff of air. "No, I overreacted. It isn't like you can do anything to me."

Her lips pursed. "Hey, I already know I'm scrawny. You don't hafta rub it in when you're built like a gazelle, and I'm a mouse."

She didn't laugh. Yumeno rubbed her neck. Her joke, if she could even call it that, fell flatter than the seesaw. Yumeno scratched her nose, loathing the faint layer of grease that had accumulated throughout the day. Wiping her hand on her blazer, she tried to smile with quivering lips at Harukawa.

Harukawa drummed her fingers on her hips. "Do you want something from me?"

"Uh, n-no, I mean, kind of?" At the slow tilt of Harukawa's head, Yumeno sensed her growing agitation by her continued hesitation. It was like the hairs on her neck stood at full attention. And swallowing the lump in her throat, she pushed aside her request to accompany her and asked, "What are you doing right now?"

"Nothing concerning you, Yumeno. Yourself?"

She scratched her cheek. "Um, just investigating. I haven't found anything interesting, though. It's the same bells and whistles."

"I see."

At her flat remark, Yumeno groaned, wishing she had her wand. With a single wave, she could've whisked herself away by transforming into a flock of doves. Flying free from such an uncomfortable conversation was a fantasy that made the corners of her mouth twitch.

"Anything else?" Harukawa demanded, an edge in her voice, denoting her displeasure by the prevalent silence.

Yumeno pointed at her lab. "Actually, you were going to your lab, right? Can I go with-?"

She leered over the tip of her nose, interjecting, "No. No one can enter. With that said, sorry, but if you have nothing better

to do than blunder your way through this conversation, I have to go."

As if she had pricked herself on a needle, Yumeno grimaced. She rubbed her hands together, her clammy palms unable to stick. She rocked in place, unable to withstand the weight of Harukawa's glare. It wasn't as if she had caused any offense by asking meaningless questions, but she supposed in their dire circumstances, to Harukawa, asking them was like shooting the breeze, a luxury they couldn't afford.

Instead, Yumeno gasped, her brain itching in remembrance.

"Oh! Harukawa, how's Momota? Have you seen him in the hangar? Do you know if he's alright? Or if Ouma did anything *bad*?"

Like a deer in headlights at Yumeno's rapid-fire questions, Harukawa froze. Every muscle in her body tightened. The tendons in her wrists strained as she clenched her fists. It was as if a single, firm shove to her shoulders would have shattered her upper half.

Yumeno heard the floor creak. Harukawa took one step forward, resounding like an earth-shattering stomp. She loomed over the smaller girl. Her expression twisted in an amalgamation of emotions Yumeno couldn't discern. Yumeno quivered, wanting nothing more than to conceal herself in her hat, a trick that would certainly become true magic.

But in those eyes with dilated pupils, Harukawa shuddered.

She raised her head, the ceiling lights hitting her face in a way that illuminated their dark circles. She constrained herself, leaning into the wall as Yumeno quivered like a fallen leaf. One palm to her brow, Harukawa toyed with the split ends of her long hair. She refused to meet Yumeno's inquisitive, concerned gaze. And when Yumeno reached out with a bloodless hand, Harukawa pinched her skirt and spoke through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry, alright? I mean it. It's good to hear you're worried about him." She massaged her shoulder as if trying to soothe an invisible wound. "Listen closely, Yumeno. I'm only going to say this once."

"Wh-what is it?"

Her words were the cool steel of a blade piercing through

Yumeno's chest.

"Stay away from me. Nothing good will come for you by clinging to a killer."

The air left Yumeno's lungs. She stumbled, one shaky footstep back. She raised her fists to her chest, her knobby knees threatening to give way.

She dipped her chin to her chest. Uncomfortable heat spread from her nose to her brow, her cheeks flushing as her blood pumped faster between her ears. Every atom of her being screamed at her to flee. She couldn't comprehend the full depths of Harukawa's insinuations. The underlying threat, however, pounded in her head, promising retaliation if she persisted with their conversation or continued extending an olive branch to Harukawa.

She was shocked into stillness. Just as her fright had taken hold upon seeing fresh corpses, her throat dried. Although a steady rise of bile coating it, she swallowed it back, nausea pooling in her stomach. The hallway spun, splitting into new, rotating corridors. She couldn't make heads or tails of where she stood, but there was a single constant: Harukawa's piercing glower focused on her like the scarlet light of a sniping rifle.

"Leave, Yumeno," she ordered, moving to her lab. "It's better for you to just go."

Compelled to obey, Yumeno slowly pivoted.

Then, as if slapped, she stopped dead in her tracks. Her breath congealed in her lungs, forming heavy clumps in her chest. She was weighed down, as if she was carrying sandbags on her shoulders. Yumeno blinked the sweat out of her lashes, and she

was elsewhere.

Her mind's eye redirected her attention. She stood before the seesaw and the magical circle drawn in chalk. A tall, strong figure was by her side, her sturdy presence emitting a gentle warmth. And although her fingers were calloused. Chabashira's touch was featherlight as she held her hand, her words a whisper.

"Expressing your feelings is perfectly natural. Train your heart by laughing, crying, and venting your anger, Yumeno-san."

"Hey, what are you repressing? Why are you trying so hard to hold back?"

She gasped, elsewhere once again. She was in the class trial, the shadows of her friends crawling over her. But amid the darkness of her own sorrow, she found Ouma, his eyes narrowed, his finger aimed at her. His earnest questions echoed, stirring their declarations together, like fuel to a weakly lit flame, and it erupted.

Yumeno snapped her head up. She clenched her fist to her chest and yanked off her hat. Harukawa hardly reacted to her change in demeanor, though the corners of her lips pinched when she stepped forward.

She couldn't give Harukawa what she demanded. Chabashara had urged Yumeno, at the cost of her life, to be open with her feelings. Slinking away in sheepish compliance would have been a betrayal to her memory, as if she was spitting on her grave. Even Ouma, the *mastermind*, wanted her to release her bottled emotions. Although she couldn't deny their current tribulations were incited by him, how Ouma had urged her to stop lying to herself availed Yumeno to confront Harukawa. Turning

tail now, even if fright still trickled down her spine, she believed she wouldn't have been able to meet Chabashira's eyes when her time came, nor been able to stand in Ouma's presence had she fled.

"You're…my friend," she said, her words slow and deliberate.

Harukawa did not rise to her assertion. As if to mock her, she leaned into the door of her lab.

"You're my friend! I know it's-I know it's hard to believe. Maybe, sure, I still don't know you too well, but I wanna trust you and for you to trust me." She braved another step, although the chills worsened, and she forced her body to repel its shudder. "Right now, no one should be alone, and I think you feel very alone."

Harukawa scowled, a canine chewing the dead skin on her lower lip.

Yumeno reached for her hands. Although the air sparked between them, and a sizzle ran through Yumeno's fingertips, Harukawa arched her shoulder forward. She snarled, hatred burning her complexion a brilliant scarlet, but Yumeno persisted, her words as sharp as steel.

"I won't let you think you're alone. Because that's what you're thinking, right?" Yumeno took a breath, almost closing the gap between them. "You're pushing me away 'cause you're on your own, but you're not. I'm your friend, Harukawa. Please, rely on me."

It was so silent that Yumeno heard the electricity in the walls. Her blood rushed between her ears, her thundering heart threatening to rupture from her chest. But Yumeno stood

her ground. She clenched her fists and refused to break eye contact with Harukawa, hoping against hope that her words would be understood. They might not have been able to become close, and yet, Yumeno trusted Harukawa's kindness in the layers she swathed around herself, just waiting to be opened. All she needed to do was express her own feelings, and Yumeno would understand.

She reached out with her palm upturned. Her smile caused her cheeks to ache. Yumeno watched her with a prayer in her chest, its petals blossoming.

Harukawa let the silence linger. Then, she swiveled her head to the floor. She spoke out of the corner of her mouth.

"'Friend,' is it? If you were my friend, then you'd listen and leave."

Like scissors snipping the flower's stem, Yumeno's prayer collapsed.

"I told you, didn't I? Or are your ears full of wax? I'm a killer, Yumeno. Always have been-" Harukawa set her hand to her thigh, the outline of her holster pressing into her skirt. "-always will be. At this point, I can't spare *anyone*."

"B-b-but-! Haru…" Yumeno faltered, her name trailing off. And as she stuttered, Harukawa walked around her to her door. She wrenched it open behind Yumenos' back. Yumeno managed to look over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of Harukawa's face as she scurried inside her lab.

The door slammed shut, and a single thought crossed her mind.

If she was really upset with me, why did she look heartbroken?

Her shoulders slumped, and Yumeno collapsed. Her bottom hit the floor, strength zapped from her. She let her head hit the wall, groaning. Her eyes burned, and her nose ached, a tingle across the red tip. A convulsion with the force of a tundra swept through her, and Yumeno choked on a sob, Harukawa's threats echoing in her head.

It was useless. She couldn't uphold their expectations, nor could she console anyone. Despite her honest efforts, Yumeno had no one. All she could do was weep, her shuddering breaths punctuating her despair.

A flash of white crossed her vision. She rapidly blinked away her tears, straining her eyes to focus. Splashing blue hues shaped around her. The crouching, gangly figure of Shirogane was suddenly before her. Yumeno jumped, her nose catching on the handkerchief she held, and she inadvertently blew it, Shirogane offering a sympathetic smile through her floundering.

"Sh-Sh-Sh-Sh-*Shirogane*?" she spluttered, hiccupping. "What the heck? How long have you been there?"

Disappointment darkened her complexion. "Um, I was just walking up here. Then, Harukawa-san ran right by me. I tried greeting her, and when she didn't answer, I followed her." She held up her index fingers. "By the time I caught up, she was already speaking with you, so I didn't want to interrupt and stayed in my lane. No offense, but this whole time, I've been in plain sight."

She went to retort, only to pause. It had been a common occurrence for Shirogane to go ignored, now that Yumeno had given it a second thought. She fiddled with her collar and

mumbled, “Oh. Whoops. Uh, my bad.”

“No worries. I’m-” She paused, folding her hands in front of her pleated skirt. “-I’m impressed with you, Yumeno-san. It took a lot of guts to try and help Harukawa-san.” Shirograne smoothed a stray, lank lock of hair behind her ear, tilting her head. “I think you’ve really grown.”

Yumeno gasped. Awe rained upon her. She stared into Shirogane’s eyes, her hands being lifted. Shirogane raised Yumeno to her feet, locking their fingers together. Her heart pounding, it was a much calmer sensation, like biting into something sweet.

Yumeno leaned into Shirogane, her inquiries rushing out of her. “R-really? I have?”

She nodded. “Indeed. You were courageous, Yumeno-san. I wish I had half the courage as you. Why, just now, I couldn’t even get Harukawa-san to notice me.”

She couldn’t help herself. She wreathed her arms around Shirogane’s back. Burying her face into Shirogane’s chest, she almost cursed herself for seeking affection after witnessing Harukawa’s sorrow. But she, too, was weak. She was human, desperate for companionship in a place that served to sever those ties.

Shirogane’s stick-thin arms pressed into her. One hand to the base of her head, the other to the small of her back, Shirogane whispered in her ear. “It’ll be okay, Yumeno-san. Let’s investigate together. I’m sure Harukawa-san will realize how hard you tried for her, so let’s give her time and space. That will be for the best.”

Sniffling, Yumeno clung to Shirogane’s blazer. Her head bobbed in agreement, leaving wet stains by her buttons. Shirogane released her but still held onto her shaking hand. And although Shirogane guided her away from the lab, Yumeno cast a final look over her shoulder, trusting Harukawa would open the door one way or the other.

written by brigh*star
spot art by emmy

THE ASTRONAUT, THE WITCH, & THE CROSSBOW

A pitch black void.

That was all Himiko Yumeno could see.

The red headed mage didn't know where she was, but after everything that had happened over the past few weeks, she couldn't say she was surprised. She did her best to count out the facts as well as she could, just like Shuichi often did in the trials.

The first fact was weird. Somehow she could see herself even in the pitch blackness all around, like she was an illuminating night light, but she tried to not focus on that. The second fact was she needed to find her way out, lest she be trapped here forever, wherever 'here' was anyway.

Himiko wrapped her sorceress cape around herself slightly as she continued to walk, her footsteps making small pat noises like she was walking on a shallow puddle, *'I have to find the exit soon. This place just has bad magic oozing from everywhere and I can't get stuck right before I rescue Momota with everyone.'*

All she could hear were her continued footsteps for a few more seconds before she heard a loud creak from behind her. She didn't know why but the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Unlike her footsteps, the creak sounded more like a claw or some other sharp object scratching into some wooden structure. It didn't sound like a normal footstep, it was inhuman, dangerous, and Himiko didn't like that in the slightest.

For a split second her mind went to the large wooden floorboards that were back on the third floor of the academy, followed by the glint of a silver sickle. Himiko just gulped however as she did her best to ignore the memory.

She quickly spun around, coming face to face with a floating figure a few metres away, their black and purple ripped cape billowing in a breeze that she couldn't feel herself. A large wizard's hat, similar to her own but far grander, covered the face of the intruder, making it impossible to identify them.

Himiko knew what was before her and held out her hand, producing a small energy flash of light as her golden staff appeared. She pointed the diamond tip towards the figure as the blue crystal shone with power, "Anti-mage! I knew this was one of your tricks. You may have taken my master's power and forced him to leave me, but I won't let you take mine too. I've grown since your organisation last saw me and I will fight with all the power I have."

It was taking a lot of energy out of her to sound this brave and strong. Her knees threatened to shake as she just tightened her grip around the staff, using it as her anchor as sweat tried to gather itself near her brow. She knew if Tenko or Angie was standing with her right now they would have been proud. She gripped her staff tighter as she glared, "I will push you back."

The figure remained still, not saying a word for a few seconds before it started to shake. Himiko blinked as she heard a laugh that sent a chill through her whole being.

“Nishishi… shishi… Up… Upupupupu!”

Himiko sweated as the figure finally revealed their face.

Kokichi Ouma, the mastermind of the horrific killing game, looked back at her. Only now there was a Monokuma eye tattoo under his left eye and a black broken heart under his right. Although it gave him a slight clown appearance, Himiko felt no joy or laughter, only fear and unease.

“Upupupu, I’m far worse than any anti-mage.” Kokichi cackled cruelly as he lifted both his arms up, his cape and robes fluttering in the phantom wind, “I am despair incarnate!”

Himiko gulped as Kokichi grumbled, looking at his attire in disdain, “Seriously, how do you wizard freaks get anything done, I can hardly move in this get up.” He lowered his arms slightly, showing off how impractical the sleeves were. He started flapping his arms erratically but with purpose, trying to unearth his hands from under the multiple layers of cloth.

The mastermind rolled his eyes as they slowly shifted from their usual purple hue, to a blood red colour as he snapped his fingers, finally getting the robes out of the way. Suddenly the outfit seemed to turn into smoke as it revealed a new get up. Now Kokichi was wearing the clothes Himiko was far more used to, only now he had a grand royal crown on his head at a slight tilt, and a magnificent king’s cape which was black and white.

The Remnant of Despair twirled, showing Monokuma’s face on the back of his cloak before sighing in satisfaction, “Now that is

muuuuch better! Nishishi, far more stylish to be ruling the world in.”

Himiko gripped her staff tighter as Kokichi locked gazes with her again, his eyes now back to deep purple as he floated down. Himiko tried to block him, but the monster just used one finger to move the staff away as he got right in Himiko’s face, “You’re weak, you know that right? I mean, everyone who’s still alive is weak, but you are the weakest of the weak. I don’t even know how you’ve survived this long. ”

Himiko went to cast a spell but the creature dodged, laughing, “Some would say you’re pretty lucky. Maybe even Lucky Student lucky considering all the times you’ve been accused in the trials, but your hope is fleeting. Your light isn’t even strong enough to brighten up this dark world we’re in. I’ve already won this battle of humanity and you might as well give up-” He then flashed her a horrifying demonic face as his mouth seemed to contort into an inhuman shape as his eyes

somehow became pitch black, getting right into her personal space, twisting the metaphorical dagger, "-just like Chabashira and Angie did. "If Kokichi wanted her to feel hopeless, it did the opposite, "Don't you dare say their names!" Himiko gritted her teeth as she yelled, shoving her staff into Kokichi making him stagger backwards. Kokichi looked confused and Himiko used the opening to ready her weapon and fire balls of magic energy at him.

Just as the fire balls got closer, Kokichi grinned as he waved his hand, fizzling the magic out of the air like it was nothing. His grin then turned into a stubborn pout, "Tsk tsk, now that's playing dirty. And here I thought we were friends. If you're gonna be like that, guess I need to step up too."

Kokichi clapped his hands this time as five Monokuma's rose from the inky depths beneath them both. Himiko gasped as unlike the normal robot Himiko had grown accustomed to, these ones were on all fours, and growling like they were wild animals. Himiko recognised these from the incident in Towa city. These were beast Monokuma, killing machines. She'd need fire magic to kill these monsters.

Kokichi cackled maniacally as he pet the one closest to him, "You're in my domain, my despair is endless and your small hope is just a minor inconvenience. I could even summon the Exisal's here if I wanted, but I don't want to be too cruel. That would make it too easy for me and I want some joy out of our little encounter."

Himiko's eyes burned as she felt tears trying to well up, but she didn't dare let them as she screamed at Kokichi, "I HATE YOU! YOU'RE THE WORST PERSON ALIVE! PLAYING WITH US LIKE WE'RE TOYS WHEN WE'RE HUMAN BEINGS!"

"You should hate me. After all I am the one that killed your precious friends." Kokichi added, a vile smirk on his lips as he pointed up, "And I enjoyed all the despair it caused you."

Himiko couldn't help herself as she looked up, ready to protect herself from a Beast Monokuma, but instead her blood turned cold as she started to shake. Her throat started to close up as she tried to speak, but no words escaped. Contorted limbs were tied to a multitude of strings, making them misshapen and abnormal.

The broken marionettes were covered in a crimson liquid that Himiko had grown all too accustomed too over the past few days. The screaming features of Tenko and Angie looked like they were letting out inhuman shreeks, yet no sound came from their lips as they were frozen lifeless, their eyes clouded over like they'd been there for weeks, stuck in a tortured state in their final moments. The blood dripped down from them as they landed on Himiko's cheek, burning the horrific scene into her eyes.

She couldn't look away as the pure fear went through her, "Ten…ko…. An…gie."

Himiko only looked away when she saw a figure dart towards her. She gasped as she saw Kokichi's hand morph into a claw and wrap around her throat. The girl screamed in pure fear as she felt the hand press down for a second.

Kokichi's face morphed once again into something unholy, as his voice came out in a more distorted way this time. His voice was muddled with two others, one that sounded like Monokuma, and the other which sounded like a female.

"***Pathetic child.***"

And then the sensation was gone as she continued screaming as she sat up. Sweat covered her as she gasped, looking around as her dorm room finally came into focus. Himiko finally stopped screaming as her eyes darted around her prison. All she could hear was her heartbeat thrumming in her ears and her erratic breathing. She kicked her covers off as they felt like they were trying to trap her.

The images from her dream kept flickering before her eyes as she failed to calm down, pulling at her hair before she finally locked eyes on the door. The only thing going through her mind was the word 'escape' as she lunged for the handle, grabbing her blazer on the way past but leaving her normal hat behind.

She fumbled with the door handle and lock before finally freeing herself and just running, not even looking where she was going as more images of Kokichi laughing at her flashed before her eyes. The wicked smile was all she could see and the darkness it brought.

Like prey running from a predator, Himiko ran wherever her legs took her, not bothering to look where she was going. She just needed to be away. Away from that room. Away from that dream. Away from the Academy where everyone had died. If she was not in that building she was safe.

She finally stopped when her legs couldn't go anymore, collapsing and gasping for air. It was only then that her brain came back from its panicked state and she realised where she was.

She was now slumped in the hanger, closer to Kokichi, the mastermind. She had messed up big time. She just gasped and gasped for air, trying to fill her lungs up to quell the burning fire in her chest.

After a few moments, she slumped against the wall. The cold metal sensation brought her the rest of the way back to reality as she finally got her breathing under control. However, despite that, her body shook. The adrenaline and fear mixed all together, making her unable to stand.

Himiko counted in her head as she tried to bring her breathing back to a normal level, as well as her heartbeat, like Angie had taught her.

"Yumeno?"

Himiko's eyes shot open as her heartbeat skyrocketed once again. Her eyes darted around as she tried to find where her name had been spoken from, knowing that wasn't part of her imagination. Sweat started to form on her back again as she worried someone would see her and think she was trying to kill someone, or worse, Kokichi had seen her and would wrap his hands around her throat and take her life in the real world this time.

"Yumeno? That is you out there, right?"

Himiko heard the voice a lot clearer this time as she finally noticed the small window. She saw purple eyes and almost froze, but then noticed the small goatee. Her whole body relaxed as she knew this was Kaito. He was still alive.

She then gasped before scrambling up, rushing towards the window. It was kind of high for her, but if she stood on her

tiptoes she could just about see in.

"Momota!"

The astronaut sighed in relief as he peeked out. Concern then flashed over his face the second he saw the expression on Himiko's face, "You doing okay? You're covered in sweat and breathing awfully heavy."

Himiko opened her mouth but no words came out. She looked back down at the floor as the images of her nightmare came back once more. The claws, the bodies, the hurtful words. She could feel her eyes starting to get moist and just slightly gritted her teeth. She didn't want to worry Kaito, he was in a much worse situation than her. At least her issues were imaginary.

A few more seconds of silence went by before Kaito just sighed softly, "Nightmares can be like that."

Himiko looked back up at Kaito with surprise as he continued, just about seeing his usual comforting smile through the small window, "I've had enough of those here myself to recognise it when other people have had them. It would be weird not to have bad dreams given our situation. But you gotta keep pushing through, can't let the bad guys win, right?"

to have bad dreams given our situation. But you gotta keep pushing through, can't let the bad guys win, right?"

Kaito then carefully stretched his arm through the gap and offered his hand to the scared girl. Himiko didn't hesitate as she took it, "I'm so sorry, Momota. I will try to take my long rest in a bit. I need my mana higher so we can save you. I don't want to lose another friend to Ouma. I will help you this time before

it's too late."

The tears were threatening to spill, but fought them to keep them from doing so. Tenko had told her it was okay to cry, but she didn't want to break down here, not when Kokichi could find her.

Kaito must have felt how tightly the girl was gripping his hand, the hope and fear all going through her all at once as he carefully rubbed his thumb in a small circle, trying to sooth Himiko, "Hey, Yumeno, it's okay. What happened to Chabashira and Angie was terrible, but I refuse to face the same fate!"

Himiko let go of Kaito's hand as he pulled it back into the bathroom, making a fist, "I can't sit by while all of you try to help me. I'm stuck though so my options are limited. I just need something. Something so I can-..."

Although Kaito had stopped mid sentence, the expression on his face shifted. While he had looked hopeless a second prior, that was now replaced with determination as an idea had shown itself. He seemed apprehensive but he looked Himiko square in the eye before nodding to himself, "Hey, Yumeno, could you do me a favour as you're here?"

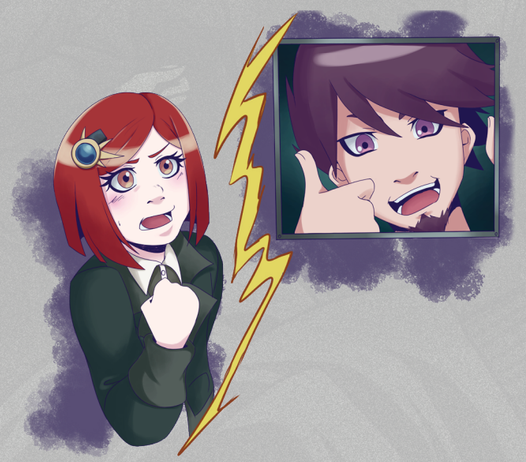
Himiko blinked slightly in confusion, '*What could I even do? I'm useless. I can't even squeeze through that window and I'm the shortest one here.*'

The girl was snapped out of her spiralling thoughts however by the look Kaito had. She knew this look well and knew now why Shuichi had gravitated towards the astronaut so much. This was the face of a true leader, one that would go to hell and back to save anyone. Kokichi could shove his talent where the sun didn't shine because Kaito was the true ultimate leader.

"Sure." Himiko nodded, "What can I do?"

Kaito's eyes lit up as his expressions softened, "If you're worried about tomorrow, maybe I can help take some of that burden off you by doing what I can from my side tonight. I ain't gonna lay back and do nothing. I'm gonna fight alongside you all, even if it isn't literally by your sides. If you help me, that is?"

His words helped calm the mage down even more as she nodded, balling her own hands into fists, "I'll help. I won't say it's a pain. I'll fight just like Tenko would."



She remembered when the Aikido-master had stood side by side with the astronaut to protect the group from the Exisals. Tenko may have hated men, but even back then she stood with Kaito, so Himiko would do the same.

Kaito seemed to hesitate for a moment before making up his mind, "I need you to get me a crossbow from Harumaki's lab."

That cold shiver came back as she took a step away from Kaito, "WHAT! N-NO! I can't…"

Kaito quickly waved his hands, panic setting in as he quickly looked behind him, "Shhh! Ouma will hear you."

He took a breath in as he explained, "I'm not gonna kill Ouma, I just want to disarm him. He has the remote control for the Exisals, right? We all saw him use it. If I can stop him from using them while you guys come to bust me out, that will make your side of things much more of a cake walk. I would never stoop to his level and kill someone like he has by orchestrating this game. Everyone's deaths are on his hands, but even if I killed him that won't bring them back. I just need you to bring me one single bolt. That is all. That's all a hero like me needs to flip the tables. Just trust me."

Himiko gulped dryly but slowly nodded her head, agreeing to comply with his plan, "Nyeeh, okay, I'll do it."

Kaito grinned and gave the girl a thumbs up, "It will be our little secret for now, but once you all come rescue me, I'll tell the others how brave you were!"

Himiko couldn't help how bad this plan sounded as she held her arm, refusing to look Kaito directly in the eye, so he did his best to put her mind at ease, "Hey, this one time, I'll be *your* sidekick, *your* mage assistant! I'll be the guy who protects the mage while they cast their spell that lands the final blow! The shield to your magic staff!"

The small girl blushed in embarrassment and went to try and hide her face with her hat, cursing the fact she'd left it behind in her panic before, "Nyehh, stop it already. I get it. You don't have to go overboard like that."

Himiko then glared as sternly as she could, "You better not die,

you hear me! If you do, I'll curse you with one of my trademark curses. And trust me, they pack a punch."

Kaito just laughed, "I promise, now hurry! You're looking for a black case in Harumaki's lab by the back wall. You can't miss it."

Himiko gave the astronaut one final nod before quickly walking away, 'I won't lose another friend.'

The mage then gritted her teeth as she looked back towards the hanger door, *'Watch out Ouma, you're about to see how powerful the hope of me and my friends is!'*

COMET

written by robin

You approach the space station with the kind of reverence usually saved for holy sites.

It's large, dark and ominous as it hangs as if suspended, forever trapped in orbit around a moon you don't know the name of. It was supposed to be humanity's salvation. It ended up as a death trap. They never reached their destination. Probably lucky for you, because that means your journey to the station wasn't as long as originally expected.

All these young people, you think as you reach the airlock, *all that wasted potential*. You're here to find the reason for it. To find evidence, clues, anything that can help figure out what really happened.

It was a state-of-the-art project, the first of its kind, and it took years to build to all the correct specifications.

The inside of the station is quiet, not unexpectedly. The candidates likely would not have spent any time here, being inside the inner sanctum the whole time, where the surroundings and atmosphere were meant to emulate Earth, complete with a normal day-night cycle. The interior does not at all look like what you expected it to. The building at the center is overgrown, covered in weeds and other plant-life. It also looks like there have been multiple explosions on the premises.

You take a breath, and begin your investigation.

It's harder than you expected. You start with cataloging the cameras. There must be thousands of hours of material: audio, video, any communication via text that might have been cataloged.

You explore the compound, which is more vast than you had expected. It's deserted, however. There is no sign of any of the young individuals who were selected for the program. Not inside, or outside. Nor did you expect there to be. It's as if everybody has gone up into thin air – which, in a place like this could theoretically be possible. If a body was launched out of an airlock, chances would be that it would never be seen again. Space is far too vast for that. You know what the rumors say, and the rumors say the hand-picked students are more than just gone – they're all dead.

You find the control room at some point, and make a note in your file to come back at the end of your investigation. This room might be one of the most important places in the entire complex. After all, this is the place that ought to have all the records, and back-ups of them as well. In the corner, there's a creepy bear head.

It's not until you reach the hanger in the back that you find your first clue that something awful happened here. It's discolored and dried out, but there's clearly blood on the floor and on the machines. Somebody died here.

You make a note of the mecha machines lining up the wall, and then remember that you saw a broken one in the courtyard earlier. Did they use it?

You're nearly done with your investigation, have watched multiple tapes, made countless notes – when you find the recorder. It's lying on the grass, right in the open, as if somebody

dropped it there by accident and then just… left it behind.

The recorder makes a startling crackling sound when you press play, and then a voice rises up from out of the tape. "Hey, uh, gramps. Grandma. It's me, Kaito. I thought I'd…" The voice is silent for a little while. The tape rolls. You wait.

"If you're hearing this, I'm probably dead." There's a laugh, without much humor in it. "I don't know if anyone's gonna hear this, actually, I just thought… Well, somebody's gotta leave something behind, right? If anyone ever finds this tape, they gotta know what happened. Because… maybe it's not too late, yanno?" At this point, the speaker, Kaito, clears his throat, "but the others, maybe they're not gone yet. They're definitely still there! Shuichi, Harumaki, and Yumeno, and… Yeah. They'll definitely be okay. They gotta be."

You can hear the speaker take a breath, and then he coughs, loudly. The sound cuts off in the middle of a rattle.

"Sorry about that," Kaito says when his voice returns. "I've got a bit of a… cold. Yeah." He clears his throat, again. "Anyway. If you're listening to this, gramps, grandma, you probably already know. I was finally sent into space! I bet you must've been proud of me. It's… basically all I ever wanted. I mean, with everything going on in the world, it was probably hard – but also for the best. And we were the best. Are. Those of us they picked. I mean, they didn't pick the Ultimate Astronaut for nothing!

"But most of them are gone now. Akamatsu and Hoshi and Chabashira and… Gokuhara. Yeah. They… made us kill each other. Even though we didn't want to! All because of—because of what the Mastermind wanted. And for what? According to him, everyone else is… everyone else is gone. The

end of the world happened. And we were the last people to survive, and we're all dying, too. Tch. What a waste. We could've been out here, discovering new planets, and galaxies, and asteroids, and instead—"

Kaito whispers something so quietly you miss it. You stop the tape, rewind, and turn up the volume. "Meteorites," Kaito whispers. Then, he swears.

The next few sounds don't make a lot of sense. There's heavy breathing. The sound of metal hitting metal. Kaito swearing, again, and then saying, "It can't have been meteorites!" It's difficult for you to follow what happens next. Wherever Kaito is, he's been alone up until this point – but now another voice joins him, lighter and far more cheerful than Kaito has sounded thus far. "Talking to yourself, hm, Momota-chan? You know, that's a sign of—what are you doing—hey—stop—are you recording this?!"

"Listen to me!" Kaito shouts, the audio momentarily turning so loud you wince. "Stop—stop wiggling—I *know* you lied to us about those stupid meteorites!"

"Ah, did knowing the world ended finally crack your psyche? I'd say *what a shame,* but, not really." A giggle follows.

"Did you forget I'm an astronaut?!" Kaito breathes heavily.

"Look. *Look*. Ouma, I know there's no such thing as a meteorite taking out the planet. Meteorites are too small for that! Do you know how big the asteroid that took out the dinosaurs was?!"

"Well, I'm sure Momota-chan is about to tell me."

"Ten kilometers!"

"Okay, so? I said meteo*rites*. Plural. You're such a dumbass, Momota-chan."

"No, *listen to me*: there is no such thing as a meteorite field hitting Earth. Do you know how often a single meteorite that could level a city hits the Earth? Every two thousand years. Running into multiple meteorites *doesn't make any sense*. Maybe I would've believed you if you'd said it was a single asteroid, and it was over a kilometer big – but it's not, and *you didn't!*"

"And? The world still ended. Earth is still gone. Who cares about some stupid terminology? Meteorite, asteroid – whatever."

"You're a *liar,*" Kaito whispers. "You've lied about *everything*. You're not—why would you lie about any of this?!"

"Uh, because it's fun? Your reactions are so funny, Momota-chan!"

"If this is a joke, what's the punchline, huh? The Earth was taken out by meteorites, but, surprise, it wasn't! *Ha ha*. What is *wrong with you?!*"

"Is that a sincere question, Momota-chan?"

"Does that even matter," Kaito snaps back. "It's not as if you ever tell any of us the truth." Ouma only laughs in response. It's not a surprise, then, when Kaito slowly says, "It's a lie." "All of it. The meteorites. The world ending." A short pause. "You—you being the mastermind. You can't be." You listen closely to the tape. There's an abrupt change in the noise level after a minute or so of silence, and Kaito's voice appears to be much closer to the microphone now. "I don't know what to do," he admits.

The same voice from earlier returns. "Stop talking to your silly little recording device. What's that gonna solve, huh?"

"Shut the hell up, Ouma," Kaito barks out. "You've got no room to talk."

"That's so mean of you, Momoto-chan! You're talking to a dying man here!"

"Yeah? Join the club." Kaito mildly coughs. "Guess I'll die a little faster now."

"Well, you can't blame me for that! Weird how the people you insist on believing in keep letting you down, huh?"

"Shut up. You have no idea what you're talking about."
"I don't? Wow, Momota-chan must be super smart – except Momota-chan's a moron, actually. He's so dumb for believing his assassin girlfriend won't *assassinate people*."

"You're dumb for believing an astronaut won't be able to pick holes into your *the apocalypse came from space story*."

"You're the Ultimate Astronaut, not the Ultimate Astrophysicist."

"What, do you think JAXA sends people into space without knowing anything *about* space? It's more than just—just the physical training! You have to know how physics work in space! You have to use math! You have to know how to repair things! And you have to be calm in times of crisis!"

"That's absolutely how I would describe you, Momota-chan. The calmest astronaut." You frown when you hear the other voice, Ouma, laugh in a strange way. Ni… shishi? How odd.

"Oh yeah? Well, I haven't seen you do much leading, Ultimate Supreme Leader that you apparently are."

In the background, a third voice shows up. A feminine one. "Kaito? Kaito!" It comes closer and closer, and there's a clatter as the recorder is dropped onto the floor. It continues recording, thankfully.

"Over here, Maki!"

"Here, take this!"

It's difficult for you to figure out what happens next. The voices combine, shouting, yelling. One of them laughs. Ouma, you think. Then, the only female voice says, "I will never forgive you for this."

"Aw, don't worry Harukawa-chan. You can die with the knowledge that you killed your precious Momota-chan – and I didn't even have to stick out a finger myself!"

"Ouma… Ouma, stop. Shut up."

"No, I don't think I will. Isn't it cute, how your girlfriend is gonna get executed for killing you?" He laughs again, and the sound doesn't stop so much as quiets down as the owner gets out of range of the recorder.

"Kaito. Kaito, I—"

"It's alright, Maki. It's okay."

"No, it's not!"

"It's going to be fine. Trust me, alright, Harumaki? Please?"

"I—Kaito—I can't—"

"Maki—! Shit." The hacks and coughs that come through the recorder sound anything but pleasant, and you wince. The recorder is turned off, probably by Kaito.

When it's turned on again, the sounds are soft. You think you can hear breathing. It shudders with every inhale and exhale, as if they're breathing right into the microphone, distorting the waves.

You recognize the sound of someone trying to inhale through a congested nose, failing miserably and breathing through their mouth instead. It takes a long time for anyone to say anything, the wet breathing so present and palpable you need to resist the temptation to press the button to fast forward. You can't afford to miss anything in your investigation.

"He's gone," Kaito whispers. His voice sounds rough, scratchy. "He told me not to record anymore, but… It's not like he can come back and stop me. Right? I just gotta…" A sniff. "Shit. Sorry. I really… I kinda hate him, you know, for doing this to me. But he's the one that got himself killed, and I get to… I don't even know. End all this?"

Kaito's sigh is loud enough to be caught. "I knew he was a freaking liar, what with the whole stupid meteorite thing, but I didn't think it went *this* far, you know? That he… he planned his own death. The stupid idiot wrote it all down. And now he's making me pretend to *be him*, so the others think *I'm* dead, so they'll vote wrong during the trial and end this entire fucking thing." He chuckles, but it doesn't sound like he's finding the situation very funny.

"Now I just gotta… wait, you know? For the others to show

up. Man, I hope Shuichi isn't smart enough to solve this one. It would… defeat the entire purpose. Might as well have been me under that freaking thing." You have no idea what he's talking about. Kaito interrupts your thoughts by loudly clearing his throat again. The cough that follows is so loud, you nearly feel it in your own chest. "Ugh. Gotta stop thinking that way. I gotta convince him it's really me under… under that thing." Pages are being turned rapidly. "Can you believe this guy prepared an entire script? There's even a freaking *index*. He had way too much time on his hands if he could do all this."

He quiets for a while, but the recorder isn't turned off, and you continue to listen. Kaito's breathing is far from smooth. "He knew he was gonna die this whole time. He didn't even wanna save himself. He—when I put him down under there—he told me to pull the lever. Maybe he thought I wasn't gonna, if he didn't say so. I don't know." Another gurgle. "But I think he was pretty scared, in the end. I know I was, and I wasn't even the one under there. Waiting for that slab to come down on me. Y'know, it's probably a good thing nobody's gonna find this recorder. I'll keep it with me in the Exisal. Ouma… Kokichi would probably kill me personally if I managed to ruin his whole plan with a flimsy recorder. But I guess it doesn't matter anymore. Gotta turn this thing off soon, though, before the cameras come back online. And then I just gotta… wait it out." The audio cuts off after a few more seconds.

Kaito's voice is barely a whisper the next time it appears. "Gotta be quiet," he says, redundantly. "The trial's started, but they're arguing over whether I died, or Ouma did. I played it off to Monokuma that the trial would be more interesting if they didn't know the identity of the victim *or* killer. Ouma wrote down that he wouldn't want to admit he doesn't know himself, either." He snorts. "Guess we've got the upper hand now."

He coughs again, the sound rough. “Now I just gotta keep up my end of the deal and… make sure they don’t figure it out. It’s gonna be rough. Shuichi might catch me out. He’s too smart for his own good. Usually I’d cheer him on, but I kinda need him to not get it today. I dunno. I’m probably… I know I’m gonna die. If I manage to do this thing Ouma’s set up, and I’m not picked as the blackened, even then I’ll… I know this disease I’ve got will kill me, for sure. ‘Cause I don’t think it’s all that good, to be throwing up blood and stuff.”

You could hear Kaito swallow audibly. “So, grandma… gramps… I’m… I’m really sorry. I really thought… When I found out it was a lie, I thought we had a chance. That I had a chance. I guess… Well, I gotta have faith in Shuichi, and Harumaki, and the others, that they’ll make it out of this! That’s what all of this was for! I’m gonna make sure that they’ll work it out, and they’ll end the killing game! I really… I really gotta believe that. I have to. Otherwise… what was it for?”

“That’s your cue, Mister Suspect!” A new voice appears, one that unexpectedly makes a shiver go down your spine. “Anyway,” Kaito says. “I’m probably gone, if you’re hearing this. Thanks for listening. Hopefully you can figure out what really happened.”

The recording is turned off, and when you check, it really is the last sound that was recorded. Kaito didn’t make it, you think. And when you look around the place, it looks like nobody else did either.

Or did they?

You turn towards the last place you haven’t checked. The

hole that was blasted into the dome. You take a few tentative steps, and while the lighting is dark, you can still tell what this place is.

A row of escape pods lines the wall. One of them is gone.

01:50

01:51

THE EVALUATION

written by dillas

He hates this place.

Everything in this "ultimate lab" of his sparkles under the dim light. He inspects each piece of armor and every dangerous weapon to make sure that no one has stolen it. Double checks that it all fits perfectly. Every single object in this lab is meant to modify him into a better being—an upgrade, most probably believe.

Whoever created this lab for him didn't know Kiibo at all. It certainly couldn't have been created by his professor. It's not what either of them would have wanted.

Try on a weapon?
> Yes
> No

Kiibo sighs as the words flash across his vision, his lab fading into a dull color behind it. It caught him off guard when it happened the first time, but he accepted it as the way robots process important information. These questions help him work through events and feelings.
cameras. There must be thousands of hours of material: audio, video, any communication via text that might have been cataloged.

Try on a weapon?
> Yes
> No

His inner voice chimes in with this question every night he checks his lab. At first, that question terrified him. He believed he pushed himself to a breaking point.

Try on a weapon?
> Yes
>>> No

A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. And like every night, the answer turns out to be no.

He leans against the window. Kiibo reminds himself, "It's not wrong to be curious."

The question pokes at him as he assumes a therapist would with a client. The same leading questions at the start of each session simply to analyze his mental health. Yeah, a mental health evaluation. That's all this is every night.

Really though, as long as the answer remains the same and no one steals his equipment, everyone's in good shape. Hope remains strong between them even if some of them feel hopeless in the moment.

"Ah—!"

Kiibo glances out the window in time to catch Himiko tripping over seemingly nothing. She drops a black bag (by his quick measurements, it's almost the size of Himiko herself) and swiftly picks it up. Before he can say a word, she rounds the corner and disappears.

What's in the black bag?
> Magic items
> A body
> A weapon

His chest rises as he holds an imaginary breath, an action he witnessed Kaito do when he tries (and usually fails) to not act impulsive. What kind of response was that?! Himiko's weaker than him—he hopes anyways—so logically, it's not a body… but his inner voice wants him to consider the possibility.

A weapon? Improbable. After losing her friends, Kiibo doubts she would do something so foolish. Himiko sneaks around as quietly as a pig in mud. As stated before, she's frail. Anyone could disarm her.

As for magic items… while that appears to be the most logical conclusion, after surveying his recent memories, he realizes that Himiko mentioned no plans of a magic show. Besides, doing another would not only bring up trauma, it would be boring. No one wants to see the same exact formula done over and over and over—

What's in the black bag?
> Magic items
> A body
>>> A weapon

…

…

What?!

"Weapon" repeats in his mind like a chant until he accepts this result from his inner voice. He taps his thumb against his fingers, counting each one until what he believes to be paranoia slows to a steady beat in his mind.

Alright… alright. He supposes it's not a bad thing to be paranoid to an extent. Kiibo's survived so far, and everyone lost hope. It's not out of the question that someone may be desperate and acting irrationally. He runs through scenarios.

Himiko may want to hurt Kaito. He and Angie never were on good terms, but that's so far in the past, Kiibo can't rationalize Himiko holding a grudge this long over that.

Kokichi? Sure. Many wanted to hurt Kokichi… but really, what would she do? She didn't have access to anything (that Kiibo knows of) to take him down in that Exisal.

Then there's Maki and Tsumugi. Searching his memory banks, he doesn't find a moment to warrant an attack. So that's a no go.

Shuichi's too much of a buddy. Kiibo erases that possibility. So… that's everyone, yet there's no one of interest. It doesn't make sense. There has to be another solution—

He realizes he's asking the wrong question.

Who is the weapon for?
> Kokichi
> Kaito
> Herself

Kiibo doesn't need his inner voice for that one, but he finds that it agrees with him nonetheless. Himiko wants to hand this weapon off to Kaito. No one has found a way inside the hangar, but there's the window in the bathroom that Kaito's trapped in. Kaito plans to kill or harm Kokichi.

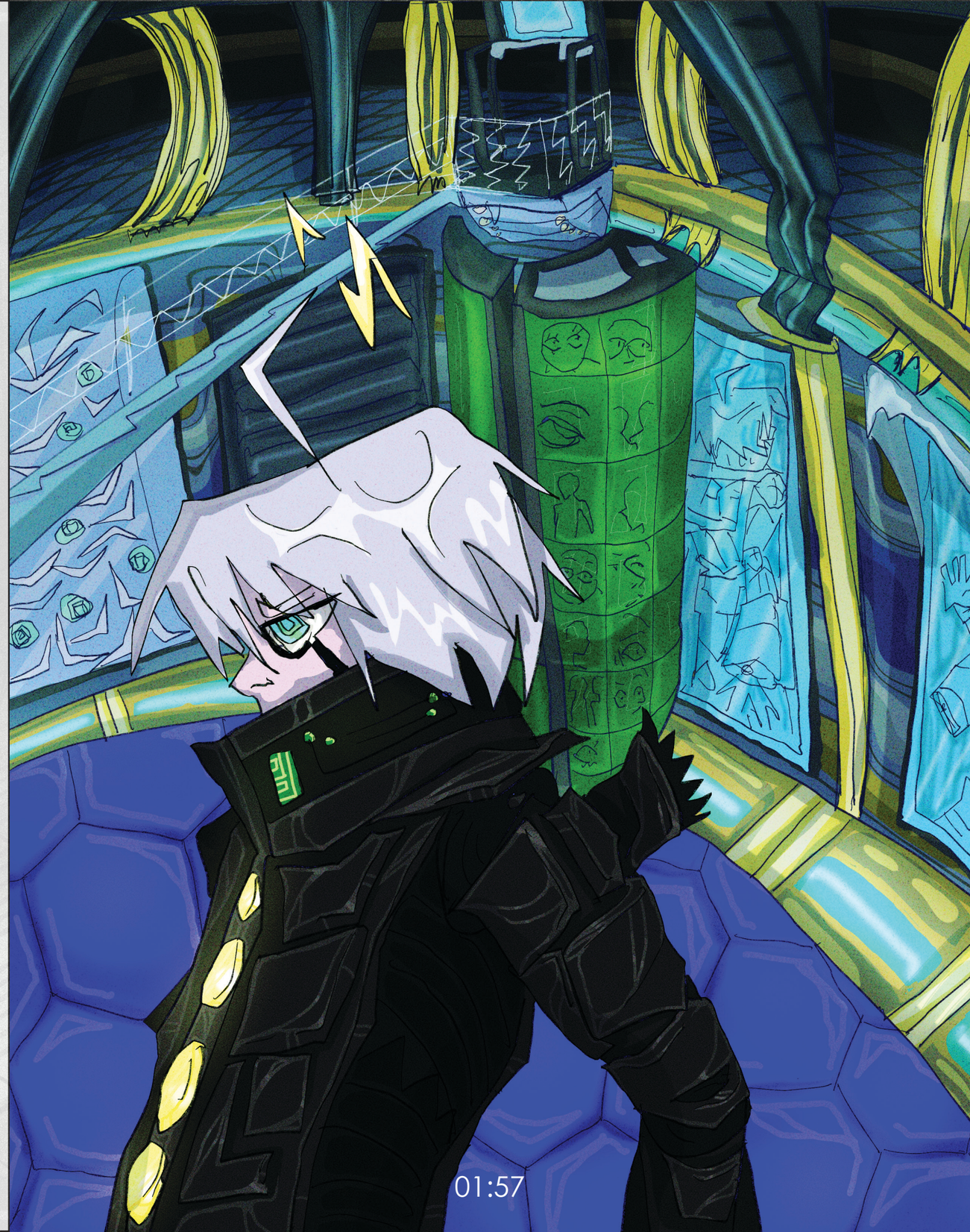
He pulls up a memory of seeing that window. If he measures

the dimensions of that… and then runs through the size of the weapon… Yes! That bag fits through the window with ease. Himiko chose to aid Kaito in this plan—er, to do what exactly?

When the question appears before his eyes, Kiibo decides that either way, it doesn't matter. Despite Kaito's intention, someone ends up hurt or killed. Kiibo can't turn away from the situation. No one else needs to die.

Try on a weapon?
>>>Yes
> No

Kiibo clicks a laser attachment into place.



01:58 WE CAN STILL BE FRIENDS, CAN'T WE? 01:59

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Boom!

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